

the impossibility of agnosticism

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Originally written in the late 1940s, this tract is out of print. Because it remains still relevant for today, I've sought to update and enhance the presentation. My added comments are contained in brackets like these [comment]. drs

PROFESSOR T. H. HUXLEY [1825-1895, grandfather to the more widely-known, Aldous Huxley, 1894-1963, author of *Brave New World* and *Doors of Perception*] introduced the word *agnostic* to members of the now defunct Metaphysical Society in 1869. Writing afterwards, he said,

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, a pantheist, a materialist, an idealist, a Christian, or a freethinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected the less sure I was of the answer, until at last I came to the conclusion that I had no part with any of these denominations except the last. Most of these good people ... were quite sure that they had attained a certain 'gnosis' -and had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure that I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble... Most of my colleagues in the Metaphysical Society were --ists of one sort or another. So I took thought and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of *agnostic*. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the 'gnostic' of church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society. To my great satisfaction, the term was accepted.

AN AGNOSTIC

An up-to-date edition of a standard dictionary defines an *agnostic* as "one who denies that we can know the absolute or infinite, or prove or disprove anything beyond the material phenomena of the universe, though such may exist." Agnosticism is defined as "the doctrine of the agnostic."

But etymological derivation and modern usage are not infrequently at variance. Many of us, for example, remember our school teachers beginning the day with, "*Prevent* us, O Lord, in all our doings. . .!" (*prevent* [archaic] means prepare) The word *agnostic* has also suffered at the hands of its users. In the student world many use the adjective of themselves in an absolute or conditioned sense, yet obviously mean by it several different things. It doesn't require much discernment to observe at least three distinct categories or groups of agnostics. Of the first two it must be admitted that they are perfectly rational positions in which a logical mind may find self-consistency for the time being. But this cannot be said of the third, which involves a greater inhibition than any it may resolve *pro tempore*. Now there are certain factors which, when they enter into our consciousness, make it impossible to hold any of these positions any longer. It is in this sense that we speak of "the impossibility of agnosticism."

1. **The Indifferent Agnostic** - This group, the first in our order of consideration, is characterized by contented, almost defiant, ignorance. The attitude of a man in this frame of mind finds expression in such phrases as, "I don't know, and quite frankly, I couldn't care less. I'm perfectly happy as I am, and have no time for people who want to interfere with other people's pleasures." If he were not so polite, he

would add, flippantly, "Run away and play"; or firmly, "You mind your own business and I'll mind mine." But his preoccupation can scarcely be interpreted as a denial of the existence or validity of facts which he has not personally investigated. All we may say is that he brushes these aside as being totally irrelevant.

2. ***The Dissatisfied Agnostic*** - This man is ignorant, and the more intellectual he is, the more disturbed he is at his ignorance. No other branch of knowledge has eluded him like this. In discussion with one who professes to know, he says, "I don't know, but I'm willing to investigate . . . I haven't a clue. Have you? If so, do tell me. I'll try anything once." Of course he has met inconsistent ministers and other religious people whose lives can't hold a candle to those of some philanthropic materialists. But, somehow, materialism doesn't intrigue him as it used to in the day when he thought he was infallible and omniscient and had "arrived"! While he makes strenuous efforts now and then to forget life's enigmas, he really wants an answer to such questions as "Why are we here?" and "Where do we go when we leave here?" without losing his interest in "How does it work?" and "Can we take it to pieces and count . . . and observe . . . ?" He is no longer taken in by the fallacy that description is explanation (a fallacy so often unrecognized in popular teaching of the theory of evolution). His credulous acceptance had previously led inevitably to his dismissing the very idea of an initiating Creator, free to interfere in the world He had made.
3. ***The Dogmatic Agnostic*** - Here is the man on whom the mantle of Thomas Huxley has fallen. He claims that we can know nothing of God or of the supernatural world. Nothing outside the material world can be known or proved. He says, tersely, "I don't know. You don't know. Nobody knows. Nobody can know." This man is not "indifferent." He takes his agnosticism more seriously than many Christians take Christianity. And his outward life may put that of some professing Christians to shame.

RATIONAL FACTORS

The factors which make it possible to talk rationally in terms of the "impossibility" of agnosticism vary, naturally, with each position. Take the first. There comes a day when those who couldn't care less begin to care intensely. Approaching death makes the most ardent pursuer of pleasure sit up and think. Voltaire, who has initiated so many into the art of ridiculing anything allegedly supernatural, cried on his death bed, "O God save me. Jesus Christ save me. God have mercy upon me." Thomas Paine, author of the widely circulated *Age of Reason*, provides another example. During his last illness he was constantly attended by Mary Roscoe of Greenwich, New York. He asked her if she had ever read any of his writings. When she said that she had read only a very little of them, he asked for her candid opinion, adding, "from such a one as you I expect a correct answer." She told him that when she was very young his *Age of Reason* was put into her hands, but that the more she read in it the more dark and distressed she felt, and she threw the book into the fire. "I wish all had done as you," he replied, "for if ever the devil has had any agency in any work, he has had it in my writing that book." While caring for his needs, she repeatedly heard him saying with intense feeling, "O Lord! Lord God!" or "Lord Jesus have mercy upon me!" There seems to be good grounds for believing that written retractions of his previous views

were destroyed by his former associates after his death¹.

There is an empirical impossibility about the second position. The man who seeks will most surely find, so long as he looks in the right place and manner. We don't expect to find our examination results pinned up in the telephone booth nearest to our house, convenient--or embarrassing--though this might be! But we should be disappointed if we did not find them pinned up in the approved place on the advertised day. In matters of religion we have the words of the highest authority, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks, it shall be opened."² We cannot prove or disprove these statements without asking and we cannot ask without receiving. If we claim to have asked already in vain, we cannot have asked aright. God has said, "Ye shall find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."³

The third position, that of the dogmatic agnostic, needs to be examined more closely. Generally, this man is well grounded in a scientific approach to life which he feels leaves little room for a personal God. The scientific method is commonly regarded as starting with observation by the senses. But to reach that point, there have to be many assumptions, for example: I exist; my senses function normally; they have affinity with those of previous observers; the sense-data correspond to reality [see my comment below]; and; there is an inherent constancy or consistency in the universe; and there is an organic unity between yesterday, today, and the unobserved tomorrow. No reasonable person objects to the scientist making these assumptions. Yet no scientist can amass overwhelming or conclusive evidence and say, "That is final proof." All he can say is, "My assumptions seem to work and supply a good explanation of phenomena." Neither science nor philosophy can prove anything absolutely.

[Many of these assumptions were the product of Baconian induction (Francis Bacon, 1561–1626) and the philosophy of *Common Sense* (or *Direct*) *Realism* articulated by Scotsman Thomas Reid (1710-1796). Reid and followers held that knowledge begins with certain *self-evident* truths. "Our inner awareness of pain and pleasure, our moral sense of right and wrong, our instinctive belief in the reality of the physical world—things like these do not need philosophical justification." Such "common sense" was seriously challenged and set aside by the popular culture's use of perception-altering drugs which began in the early 20th century.]

SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE

Now if the theologian gives due deference to scientific statements, while protesting against unjustifiable scientific dogmatism, he is surely entitled to expect similar respect for assumptions in his realm. Such respect should not begrudge. Sir Edmund Whittaker said, "When, from the purely intellectual point of view, we compare the arguments for the existence of God with the proofs of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, I should say that the theologians have it." But the indictment that could be brought against many agnostics today is that they are ignoring the evidence and treating it as beneath their contempt, a grossly unscientific and unfair attitude. This

¹ *Memoirs of Stephen Grellet*, Seeböhm, Ed. 3rd Edition (1870), pp. 74-75.

² Luke 11:9,10.

³ Jeremiah 29:13.

attitude is understandable only in the light of Christian teaching, which reveals the great gulf between the spirit of Christ and the spirit of the natural man, however well educated, moral, and refined that man may be.⁴

When it comes to material things we are credulous and amazingly gullible. When it comes to the realm of the spirit many of us unconsciously slip into an attitude which we should instantly disown if we were to examine it thoroughly. The result is that we virtually assert, "My ignorance equals factual impossibility." The reasonable attitude is, "I don't know, but I'm willing to put myself in the hands of one who does," as we do with a surgeon or an airplane pilot in their respective spheres. Some of us who pride ourselves on our rational attitude to things are of all men least rational when it comes to the things of God!

AVAILABLE DATA

Ignorance is understandable. Contemporary Christian propaganda is not of superlative quality. Unwillingness to investigate, or to face the music of taking a stand as a Christian in a neo-pagan civilization, is also understandable. But it is very difficult to understand men claiming the right to say that God is unknowable while there are data that they decline to investigate and more than one valid experiment to which they are afraid to submit.

There are those who maintain that there are no data; that in the nature of the case it is impossible to have any data. I would not suggest that many such are suppressing the evidence, because I know from experience that most, if not all, are genuinely ignorant. One of the purposes of this brief inquiry, therefore, is to suggest positive lines of investigation.

Herbert Spencer, popularly regarded as one of the foremost apostles of agnosticism, pronounced a dictum which any thinking man must accept. He stated, with all the observation there has ever been to verify his statements, that no bird has ever been known to fly out of the heavens, and no man has ever been known to penetrate with his finite mind the veil that hides the mind of the Infinite. Therefore, he postulated, the Infinite may not be known by the finite, i.e., agnosticism is secure. His dictum is fool-proof. But his deduction is *a non sequitur*, based on inadequate data, and we must reject it. He infers, without any grounds in his dictum, that the Infinite is equally incapable of penetrating the veil. This reduces the term, Infinite, to absurdity. An Infinite that is unable to express itself is less capable than finite mortals who are forever making themselves heard--especially students! And an Infinite that is capable of self-expression and is aware of the perplexity and need of man, yet fails to break through the veil, is less moral than mortal man. What man would stay in shrouded silence if he were the Infinite and knew that a word from him would resolve a thousand human complexes, integrate shattered personalities, mend broken lives, bring coveted light to baffled minds, and healing peace to disturbed hearts?

HIM OR IT?

But, says someone, what right have we to assume that the Infinite has personality, that we should, or ever could, think in terms of *Him* instead of *It*?

There are various ways of meeting this objection. For example, it is possible to infer

⁴ Romans 1:18-22.

that any existing Infinite must be the absolute, sovereign Cause of all finite substances or gases, atoms or constituents. By a myriad observations we know of no effect greater than its corresponding cause--not even atomic chain reaction with its accompanying devastation. By analogy, then, on what rational grounds could we assume that an effect such as personality (the supreme distinction of mortal man in the animal world) was produced by a cause which lacked what it somehow managed to produce? Do you say, "Evolution explains that perfectly, without admitting any need of a Creative Personality"? Inadequate data once more! Evolutionary philosophy has no room for a personal God, but let us distinguish between philosophy and scientific fact. The observable facts tell us much about the processes of development, but are absolutely silent about ultimate origins. The only scientific facts we have are neutral, open to the Christian or the materialist interpretation.

But far outweighing any conclusions that may or may not be reached by reasoning, is the fact that with our finite minds we may know of the Infinite only what the Infinite is pleased to reveal. And we may know that the Infinite is personal, not from any ontological or teleological argument, but from the fact that the Infinite has revealed Himself (Himself) as a person, exercising on an infinite scale the attributes of personality. There is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. He means what He says and will do everything that He has promised, both in mercy to those who will trust Him and in judgment against those who rebel. He has revealed Himself supremely in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. He has acted in history. History is, in fact, His story--not man's nor the "tale told by an idiot . . ." He has broken into the space-time continuum which is his own idea, subject to limitations He has imposed, and He will break in again in judgment. He has come into the world He made. Jesus Christ became true man, the God Man. He, who before time was created, existed essentially in the form of God and did not count equality with God as something to which He must cling tenaciously, but took the form of a bondservant and humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death--the death of the cross.⁵ *Is it reasonable to reject the fact of Christ's complex person because I have no philosophy for the fact?"*

"Behold the Man"

Charles Bradlaugh, one of the leading lecturers in agnosticism of the last [19th] century, constantly reiterated, "We have no quarrel with Jesus Christ, only with Christians." In His days on earth, His enemies found no fault in Him, although He made the most stupendous claims for Himself. He claimed the authority to forgive sins and to determine the destiny of all mankind. Why were they unable to convict Him of sin? Because He never sinned in deed or in thought and in Him there was no sin in embryo. A sinless man! The only sinless man the world has ever known! No wonder Pontius Pilate said, "Behold the Man." But surely death and corruption should have no claims upon the sinless man. Precisely. They had none. It was for us He went to death--voluntarily. Death had no claim upon Him because He did not sin. He was the Eternal Son, the great Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the Infinite Cause of all things finite. But He didn't come into this world to give us a demonstration of power; He came to show His love in action, as well as in word. He healed the sick. He dealt with psychological and spiritual disorders that still baffle our experts. He

⁵ Philipians 2:6-8.

restored sight, speech, and hearing. He even raised the dead. His crowning work was to lay down His life and take it up again.⁶

FAITH IN WHAT?

These things happened in Palestine. And it requires less faith to believe that they happened and were recorded by simple men, than to believe that they never happened but that these same simple men invented the amazing character of Jesus and attributed imaginary miracles to Him.

To deny with Hume the possibility of miracles may save us the trouble of examining the evidence, but is not by any means a way out of all difficulties. The suppression raises more questions than it answers. To abandon prejudice and admit the tentative nature of our so-called *fixed laws* is a more truly scientific approach. There are limits to the human mind and modern man must admit them.

"I have spoken . . ."

God is not incompetent. He can reveal Himself. The designer of speech is not inarticulate. *Ipsse locutus est!* He is not immoral. Knowing man's need, God has revealed Himself. He has revealed parts of His mind by the mouth of His prophets. He has spoken as much of His mind as man needs to know through the life and lips, deeds and death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, His Son and His express image who said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father," and "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day...For...the Father which sent me...gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak."⁷

What has God said in thus speaking? He has spoken of His infinite love towards mankind--He couldn't care more. He has explained that He made us for Himself, for fellowship with Him. He wants us to find out His will, to do it here on earth, and then enter His visible presence to share unbroken fellowship with Him.⁸ God has spoken of our freedom to choose [psychological volition], given to us that we might choose to love Him and love one another with real love, not mere "duty-demonstration." Man has abused his freedom, lost his way, and thus, lost touch with God. God's words describe, on the one hand, His hatred of sin, i.e., human self-sufficiency, rebelliousness, ingratitude, and pride; and, on the other hand, His great love towards the sinner, love that sent Jesus Christ to take the sinner's place--my place--in the condemnation due to the transgressor. By His act God's Son made available a free and righteous pardon for every man who believes.⁹ We may catch the echo today as did Dr. Thomas Bilney, (Father of the English Reformers), in his room in Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in 1516: "This is a trustworthy statement worthy to be accepted by all men, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."¹⁰ Christian data center around the death of Jesus Christ. In that death God has dealt with sin.

⁶ Romans 5:6-8; John 10:10-18, 19:1-37; Matthew 20:28.

⁷ John 14:9, 12:48, 49.

⁸ The antithesis of Hoyle's "eternity of frustration."

⁹ See Frank Colquhoun, *The Meaning of the Cross*, (London, Inter-Varsity Fellowship) and H. E. Guilleband, *Why the Cross?* (Chicago, Inter-Varsity Press).

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 1:15.

Are we willing?

"But I don't believe that God has spoken," objects someone, "I have never heard Him speaking." Failure to hear a broadcast does not prove that there was no transmission. Cutting a lecture is not the same as the lecture not being given. The fact that we went to a lecture, but failed to understand it all, is no proof that the lecturer did not know what he was talking about! And the fact that we have neglected the Bible, and never extracted much from the small portion we have read, does not mean that God has not spoken in the Bible. There is a vast difference between cramming for an exam in a religion course and reading to hear what God has to say to us. The chief difficulty with the latter lies in the realm of the will rather than the intellect. We have to be willing to do what God says when we hear Him speak.¹¹ But we go our own way so often and we want to continue going our own way. We don't want Christianity to interfere with our program. Unconsciously we prove the Bible to be true on a major issue because this is the Bible picture of man--not the utopian, "progressive" view of recent humanistic philosophy!

THE EVIDENCE

"But," we protest, "we are afraid of trusting ourselves totally to someone of whom we know so little." Ignorance may *seem* to be a plausible excuse, but we need not remain in ignorance. The data are available: *historical evidence* for the facts concerning Jesus Christ, *literary evidence* concerning the documents containing those facts, *psychological evidence* concerning His disciples, and *experimental evidence* concerning ourselves, as we are and as we may become through contact with Him--all these are branches of study open to our most careful investigation. But which of these lines of approach should the non-specialist take to begin with? Strangely enough, the answer is: None of them. They may be extremely useful and profitable later, but we should start with the most important evidence of all, that which concerns the identity of Jesus Christ. He is the Christian datum. No second-hand conviction can satisfy us here. It is possible to know for ourselves that the prophet of Nazareth was and is the Son of God.

A small document, inspired by God, was produced by the apostle John. It was written especially for those who are uncertain that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and therefore are fearful of trusting Him. There are many whose prejudices and skepticism have been dispelled through reading this document. My father was brought from Jewish skepticism to Christian faith through reading the Gospel written by John--and acting on what he read. Countless other examples could be cited.

One of the earliest skeptics, Thomas Didymus, said, "Risen! Jesus alive again? Seeing is believing! Except I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe." John records that, confronted with the risen Christ, Thomas fell at His feet crying, "My Lord and my God."¹²

John anticipated that his readers might say, "It was all very well for Thomas! Of course he would believe, faced with such evidence! Why is there no such evidence

¹¹ John 7:17.

¹² John 20:24-31.

for us? Trying to believe only intensifies our doubts."

The answer to doubts is facts, and here, says John, are the facts. Expose yourself to them. God speaks through them. Read them, and re-read them, as if your life depended upon them; for, in the deepest sense of all, it does. Here lies the secret of eternal life.¹³ To neglect the secret is to reject the life.

But as you read, do keep in mind that you are not merely studying another subject. A living God who can satisfy the longing of the human heart is certainly not a merely passive subject of human investigation. However skeptical you may be, surely you can say, "O God, if there is a God, show me the truth about Yourself as I read." Some may say that they have read this Gospel and found nothing. I have yet to meet one such person who was not determined to find nothing. God gives light to those who will obey it; but He does not pander to our intellect with flashes of irrelevant illumination. If you are willing to do God's will, as you persevere in reading, you will become aware that you are in the presence of a real, living, personality showing Himself to be utterly trustworthy. He summons you to turn from self-centered living and the idols of modern materialism¹⁴ and calls you to trust yourself to Him and follow Him to the end. He demands our allegiance, not our admiration.

Many contemporary scientists have missed the way by thinking that they were meant to be masters of nature only, while their own nature could lie un-mastered through their neglect to become servants of God--nature's Creator. What a contrast to Kepler: "I am thinking God's thoughts after Him"; to Sir James Simpson: "The greatest discovery I ever made was that I was a great sinner and Christ a great Savior"; and to Sir Ambrose Fleming: "We must not build on the sands of an uncertain and ever-changing science...but upon the rock of the inspired Scriptures." The host of skeptical scientists who have never opened their hearts to God's truth do not outweigh the testimony of one man who has humbled himself and cried to God for understanding and found the truth of Jesus Christ.

Deception Unlikely

If we still persist that God is unknowable, then we are obliged either to deny the historicity of the data concerning Jesus Christ, or, if the records are accepted as true, to label Him as an unprincipled deceiver. We are also forced to ignore or libel the testimony of sixty generations of Christians (many of whom have suffered death rather than deny what they have known to be true), and the testimony of contemporary Christians--of all nations and classes, all degrees of intellectual attainment, all levels of university life, and all branches of science--that God is faithful to His promise.¹⁵

We may deny the facts concerning Jesus Christ and continue to equate ignorance with objective non-existence or impalpability of data and suppress factors inconvenient to our theory. But it is impossible to be rational and at the same time to hold on to our dogmatic agnosticism. Any method alleged to overthrow the factual basis of the Christian faith would also invalidate all other historical facts -such a method can always be turned upon itself to resolve its own principles to uncertainty.

¹³ John 3:15, 16, 5:24, 10:28.

¹⁴ Acts 14:15, 16, 17:30, 31; I Thessalonians 1:9, 10.

¹⁵ John 1:12, 6:37; Revelation 3:20.

GOD CAN BE KNOWN

We are at liberty to say that we do not know God and that we do not want to know God, but prefer to live without Him (which is the essence of sin); however we are not thereby entitled to say that God cannot be known. God may be known, not as a piece of music, or a book, a formula, locality, or sensation, but as a living Person. We may become related to Him. The terms of the relationship are clearly stated in the New Testament. We must confess our need and accept Jesus Christ as the answer to it. We must admit the truthfulness of His diagnosis of our disorder, which has spread to all our society, and we must submit to His treatment. Receiving Him, we receive a new life and experience the miracle of the new birth which is described in John 3. As God speaks to us through the Bible lingering doubts about miracles begin to vanish and we reply to Him in prayer and thanksgiving. We pass from spiritual death to spiritual life and earthly life begins to add up in a new way.

But this is not to say that in such a relationship we have "all the answers." One of the characteristics of a man in this relationship is that he is most anxious to impress upon us that he is not therefore a know-it-all. There are a number of questions on which he is profoundly agnostic. The origin of evil, the exact moment of the first creative fiat, the date of the coming judgment of all men, his own whereabouts in twelve months time...on such questions as these he is as agnostic as he is concerning the opinion his eternal examiners will make of his yet unwritten final papers. His avowed certainty does not land him into a fool's paradise of pretended omniscience. He is aware of the limitations of his knowledge and is equally aware of his ignorance. What he knows does not paralyze his capacity for research in the realm of the unknown, but he is not relying on the unaided intellect to pierce the veil; nor is he bitterly disappointed when he comes up against an insurmountable barrier and has to echo the cry of Moses, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever..."¹⁶ Now we know in part, but a day is coming in which we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.¹⁷

After listening to an address embodying much of the material found in this booklet, Sir Hector Hetherington, Principal of Glasgow University, made the following significant remarks:

There are issues on which it is impossible to be neutral. These issues strike right down to the roots of man's existence. And while it is right that we should examine the evidence, and make sure that we have all the evidence, it is equally right that we ourselves should be accessible to the evidence.

We cannot live a full life without knowing exactly where we stand regarding these fundamental issues of life and destiny. And therefore we must decide ourselves, and you must decide yourselves.¹⁸

And what we decide, we must make known. "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men," says Jesus Christ, "him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven."¹⁹

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 29:29.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁸ Joshua 24:15; John 3:36.

¹⁹ Matthew 10:32, 33.

