

## AGNOSTICISM

“We cannot swing up a rope that is attached to our own belt.”

--William Ernest Hocking

The issue of Agnosticism is of integral importance to any theological discussion, because agnosticism complacently coexists with the broad spectrum of religions, rather than assuming a separate or opposing theological position. Thomas Henry Huxley, the originator of the term in the year 1869 CE,<sup>1</sup> clearly stated,

“Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle...Positively the principle may be expressed as in matters of intellect, follow your reason as far as it can take you without other considerations. And negatively, in matters of the intellect, do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.”<sup>2</sup>

The word itself, as Huxley appears to have intended it, does not define a set of religious beliefs, but rather demands a rational approach to all knowledge, including that claimed of religion. The word ‘Agnosticism,’ however, has since become one of the most misapplied terms in metaphysics, having enjoyed a diversity of applications.

At varying times this term has been applied to a variety of individuals or subgroups, differing greatly in degrees of piety and sincerity of religious purpose. On one extreme there are the sincere seekers who have not yet encountered substantiated

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<sup>1</sup> Meagher, Paul Kevin OP, S.T.M., Thomas C. O’Brien, Sister Consuelo Maria Aherne, SSJ (editors). 1979. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*. Philadelphia: Corpus Publications. Vol. 1, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Huxley, Thomas Henry. *Agnosticism*. 1889.

truth in the religions of their exposure. Most often, however, the religiously unmotivated utilize the term to excuse personal disinterest, attempting thereby to legitimize escapism from the responsibility of serious investigation into religious evidences.

The modern definition of ‘Agnostic,’ as found in the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, is not strictly faithful to Huxley’s explanation of the term; however, it does represent the most common modern understanding and usage of the word, which is that an Agnostic is a “person who believes that the existence of God is not provable.”<sup>3</sup> By this definition, the Agnostic view of God can be variously applied to such hypothetical entities as gravity, entropy, absolute zero, black holes, mental telepathy, headaches, hunger, the sex drive, and the human soul – entities which cannot be seen with the eye or held with the hand, but which nonetheless appear to be real and evident. Clearly, not being able to see or hold some specific thing does not necessarily negate its existence. The religious argue that the existence of God is one such reality, whereas the Agnostic defends the right to such belief, just so long as proof is not claimed.

As an aside, the philosophy that nothing can be proven *absolutely* appears to take origin from Pyrrho of Elis, a Greek court philosopher to Alexander the Great, commonly acknowledged to be the ‘father of skepticism.’ Although a certain degree of skepticism is healthy, protective even, the extreme position adopted by Pyrrho of Elis is somewhat problematic. Why? Because the confirmed Pyrrhonist logically stimulates the skeptic of skepticism (i.e. the normally thinking person) to question,

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Della (editor). *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. 1993. Second Edition. Oxford University Press. p. 16.

“You claim that nothing can be known with certainty...how, then, can you be so sure?” The enemies of logic can create a great deal of confusion by such compilation of paradox and philosophical compost. One great danger is to seduce an abandonment of logic, in favor of decision by desire. Another danger is to allow immersion in intellectual contortionism to stifle common sense.

Humanity should recognize that if common sense prevails, stubborn detractors begin to look a tad daft when the apple has fallen on their heads a few too many times. After a point, those with the common sense to accept vanishingly small confidence intervals (or ‘P’ values, as they are known in the field of statistical analysis) begin to hope for bigger, higher, and harder apples to either convince the academically defiant Pyrrhonists or simply remove them from the equation.

So, by common sense (and common experience), most people accept whatever theories appear most reasonable, whether proven in an absolute sense or not. Hence most people accept the theories of gravity, entropy, absolute zero, black holes, the hunger drive, an author’s headache and a reader’s eyestrain -- and well they should. These things make sense. In the opinion of those of religion, all mankind should also accept the existence of God and of the human spirit, for the overwhelming evidence witnessed in the many miracles of creation support the reality of The Creator to the point where the confidence level approaches infinity and the ‘P’ value diminishes to something smaller and more elusive than the last digit of Pi.

With regard to T. H. Huxley’s invention of the term ‘agnostic,’ he was quoted as having explained,

“Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there (the Metaphysical Society), and expressed itself with entire openness; most of my colleagues were *-ists* of one sort or another; and, however kind and friendly they might be, I, the man without a rag of a label to cover himself with, could not fail to have some of the uneasy feelings which must have beset the historical fox when, after leaving the trap in which his tail remained, he presented himself to his normally elongated companions. So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of ‘agnostic.’”<sup>4</sup>

According to the above, individuals who identify with the label of ‘Agnostic’ should recognize that the term is a modern invention which arose from one individual’s identity crisis in a circle of metaphysicians. The one who coined this term identifies himself as a man without a label, analogous to a fox without a tail -- both of which imply the self-perception of a certain degree of personal inadequacy. What part of this man’s pride did he leave behind in the jaws of a spring-loaded religious enigma? Fairly obviously, Huxley, like many prominent metaphysicians and theologians throughout history, was unable to find a doctrinal pigeonhole to suit his concept of God.

Regardless of the above considerations, even if a person were to argue that Huxley did nothing more than attach a label to a previously un-named but ancient theology, the two word question “So what?” jumps the synapses of consciousness once again. Labeling a theology does not imply validation or, more importantly,

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<sup>4</sup> Huxley, T. H. *Collected Essays*. v. Agnosticism.

value. If there were value to the concept, a person would suspect that it would have been voiced earlier -- like 1800 years earlier and in the teachings of a prophet like Jesus. Yet the prophets, Christ Jesus included, seemed to have a very different message, the point of which was the reward of faith in the *absence* of absolute proof, *despite* the inability to view the reality of God with one's own eyes.

Pursuing the concept of Agnosticism for the sake of discussion,

“According to Huxley, the word was designed as antithetic to the ‘Gnostic’ of early church history, and was intended to be opposed not simply to theism and Christianity, but also to atheism and pantheism. He meant the word to cover with a mantle of respectability not so much ignorance about God but the strong conviction that the problem of His existence is insoluble.”<sup>5</sup>

The tail-less fox searching for a “mantle of respectability?” So it would seem, but who could blame him? It was a difficult and confusing time -- given the setting, many intellectuals must have been pretty frustrated and imagined themselves to be short not just a tail, but both hindquarters as well. In a time and place where, as Huxley describes, the choice, in a practical sense, was Christianity or nothing, anybody who pondered the theological difficulties would have been forced to reconsider the oath of membership to any of the exclusive Christian clubs. Invention of the label of ‘Agnosticism’ was no doubt born of the frustration of having had to deal with those whose doctrines could easily be discredited by men and women of intellect, but in a theological void where an acceptable alternative was not yet

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<sup>5</sup> Meagher, Paul Kevin OP, S.T.M., Thomas C. O'Brien, Sister Consuelo Maria Aherne, SSJ (editors). 1979. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*. Philadelphia: Corpus Publications. Vol. 1, p. 77.

presented to the English-speaking world. What could a person who believed in God, but who did not believe in the religions of his or her exposure do? Escape was the only alternative, and that, so it appears, is exactly what Huxley did. Huxley coined a term which encapsulated an ages-old concept which afforded all who claimed allegiance an escape route from the overheated, overcrowded room of religious discussion, and into the private den of personal convictions.

Yet, although the term afforded a popular relief valve for those who evaded the pressure of serious religious discussion in the time of Huxley, the question arises, “Does the term have value in the present day?” The truth of the concept remains, but the question is not whether there is truth in the concept, but whether there is value in the truth. A rock has truth, but what is its value? Very little, under normal circumstances.

So on one hand, the ‘So what?’ factor remains. Encapsulating the ages-old concept of the non-provable issue of God sounds so neat and practical, but does the concept of non-provability change anybody’s belief in God? A person can embrace any of the myriad belief/disbelief systems while at the same time admitting that the truth of God cannot be proven. Yet such an admission does not change the depth of conviction each person holds in his or her heart and mind.

And most people know this.

Few devotees believe they can support their religion or the existence of God with absolute and irrefutable proof. Growing challenges by increasingly intelligent

and well-informed laity have placed an impossible burden of proof on the clergy of the Judaic and Christian faiths, in specific. Questions and challenges, which in previous ages would have brought charges of heresy as a practical measure for the suppression of sedition are now commonplace, and deserving of answers. The fact that Church responses to such queries defy logic and human experience has resulted in clergy often having no other resort than to reverse the challenge upon the questioner, in the form of asserting, “It’s a mystery of God, you just have to have faith.” The questioner may respond, “but I do have faith – I have faith that God can reveal a religion which would answer all my questions,” only to be counseled further, “Well, in that case, you just have to have *more* faith.” In other words, a person has to stop asking questions and be satisfied with the party line. Even when it doesn’t make sense, and even when the foundational scriptures teach otherwise.

Hence, over the past few centuries the hierarchy of the many Judeo-Christian sects have been driven back on their heels by God-given logic to a teetering, bowed-back, arm-spinning posture of Gnostic ideology, which in the early (i.e. the period of those who knew best) history of Christianity was regarded as a no-holds barred, no doubt about it, ‘gather-the-firewood-and-plant-the-stake’ heretical sect. The scenario is bizarre; it is like saying, “Sure, that oven was last year’s model. The prototypes didn’t work. In fact they exploded and everyone who used one burned to death, but we’re bringing it back anyway because we need the money. But we promise you, if you believe -- I mean really believe -- then we promise you’ll be OK. And if it *does* explode in your face, don’t blame us. You just didn’t believe enough.” The sad thing is, lots of people are not only buying it, they’re setting one aside for each of their kids.

The overall scheme of things is one in which clergy considered Christian faith to be founded upon knowledge up until the educated laity came to know better, as discussed above (Section 3.C.1.). For many centuries laity were not allowed to own Bibles, with the punishment of possession in more than a few cases having been death. Only with suppression of this law, manufacture of paper in Europe (14<sup>th</sup> century), invention of the printing press (mid-15th century), and translation of the New Testament into the English and German languages (16<sup>th</sup> century) did Bibles become readily available and readable by the common literate man. Hence, for the first time, laity became able to read the Bible (where available – publication and distribution remained limited for many decades) and present rational challenges to established doctrines based upon personal analysis of the foundational scriptures. When such challenges defeated the arguments of the Church apologists, most Christian sects did an amazing thing -- they disavowed the nearly 2,000 year-old claim that doctrine should be based upon knowledge, and instituted instead the concept of salvation through spiritual guidance and justification by faith. Particular emphasis was placed on the alleged virtue of blind, unthinking (and hence unquestioning) commitment.

The modern ‘spiritual’ defenses which sprung from the new church orientation mimic the heretical ‘mystic exclusivity’ of the ancient Gnostics, all echoing familiar sentiments such as, “You just don’t understand, you don’t have the Holy Spirit inside you like I do,” or “You just need to follow your guiding light -- mine is leveled, laser-straight and Xenon bright, but yours is flickering and dim” or “Jesus doesn’t live inside you as he does inside me.” No doubt such assertions appeal to each speaker’s ‘aren’t I special’ personal ego inventory, but if someone insists on belief in spiritually

exclusive pathways, then no doubt others will insist on a discussion of the difference between delusion and reality. T.H. Huxley, no doubt, would have been happy to chair the debate.

The problem is that claiming mystical exclusivity as the key to guidance and/or salvation is to claim that God has arbitrarily abandoned the 'un-saved' of creation -- hardly a God-like scenario. Does it not make infinitely more sense for God to have given all of humankind equal chance to recognize the truth of His teachings? Then those who submit to His evidences would deserve reward, while those who deny would be blameworthy for failing to give acknowledgement, credit, and worship where due.

But unfortunately, the nature of delusion is that the ones who are deluded rarely are capable of recognizing the errors of their misunderstanding; the nature of the Gnostics is similar in that they typically are too enamored with their self-satisfying, self-serving philosophy to realize the falsehood of their foundation. And indeed, it is hard to believe the waiter has spat in the soup when the restaurant is rated five-star, the service refined, the presentation impeccable. Appearance and taste may be so good as to defy reality. But it is the patron who regards the bearer of truth as an inconvenient kill-joy rather than as a sincere benefactor who is going to wear the sicknesses of the server home.

So why the contemporary return to heresy-slash-Gnosticism, with the official sanction of so many religious institutions? Well, it is understandable. Since no logical defense of modern day Judaism or Christianity withstands the pressure of present day

scriptural analysis, this ‘mystical exclusivity’ is a last ditch defense of a rapidly crumbling doctrinal status quo. Significant attrition has occurred in numerous Judeo-Christian sects already. The remaining faithful are largely forced into ‘believing agnosticism,’ holding personal faith in the existence of God and a specific doctrine as the approach to Him, while at the same time recognizing that such beliefs cannot be objectively proven.

Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Sir William Hamilton’s *Philosophy of the Unconditioned* (1829), and Herbert Spencer’s *Principles* (1862) laid the cellulose foundation of the concept, and T.H. Huxley packaged and popularized it.

So, does the concept of Agnosticism have value? Returning to the rock, which only has value to those in need of one, Agnosticism has practicality for those who feel the need of a theological defense system. Those who are satisfied with such theology end religious discussions by deflecting the threat of rational argument off the shield of Agnostic defenses. To all others, it is just a rock. It doesn’t change anything, it doesn’t do anything. It just sits there like the impotent and self-evident lump it is, occupying metaphysical space.

Examination of the Islamic religion fosters an interesting thought, in this regard. The teachings of Islam were not available in the English language until Andre du Ryer’s French translation of the meaning of the Holy Qur’an was rendered into English by Alexander Ross in 1649 CE. This first translation into the English language being notably of hostile intent and filled with inaccuracies, it fell hugely shy

of inviting objective analysis of the Islamic religion. As the translator stated in his address 'to the Christian Reader,'

“There being so many sects and heresies banded together against the truth (by which the author refers to Christianity), finding that of *Mahomet* wanting to the muster, I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou maist the better prepare to encounter, and I hope overcome them....Thou shalt find it of so rude, and incongruous a composure, so farced with contradictions, blasphemies, obscene speeches, and ridiculous fables...Such as it is, I present to thee, having taken the pains only to translate it out of French, not doubting, though it hath been a poyson (poison), that hath infected a very great, but most unsound part of the universe, it may prove an antidote, to confirme in thee the health of Christianity”

The translator's prejudice clearly evident, a person should hardly be surprised to find the translation fraught with error, and inclined to exert little positive impact on Western consciousness. George Sale, having been unimpressed, picked up the torch and attempted a new translation of meaning, criticizing Ross as follows:

“The English version is no other than a translation of Du Ryer's, and that a very bad one; for Alexander Ross, who did it, being utterly unacquainted with the Arabic, and no great master of the French, has added a number of fresh mistakes of his own to those of Du Ryer; not to mention the meanness of his language, which would make a better book ridiculous.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sale, George. 1734. *The Koran*. London: C. Ackers.

Not until George Sale's translation of meaning into the English language in 1734 did the Western world begin to receive teachings of the Holy Qur'an in an accurate, though all the same ill-intentioned, exposure.

George Sale's perspective is evident in the first few pages of his address to the reader, with such statements as,

“They must have a mean opinion of the Christian religion, or be but ill grounded therein, who can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery....But whatever use an impartial version of the Koran may be of in other respects, it is absolutely necessary to undeceive those who, from the ignorant or unfair translations which have appeared, have entertained too favourable an opinion of the original, and also to enable us effectually to expose the imposture...”

and,

“The Protestants alone are able to attack the Koran with success; and for them, I trust, Providence has reserved the glory of its overthrow.”

The translation of Reverend J. M. Rodwell, first published in 1861, coincided with the nineteenth century rise of oriental studies in the scientific meaning of the term. And it was during this period of dawning Islamic consciousness in Western Europe that Huxley presented his proposal of Agnosticism.

Many Muslims might wonder, had Huxley lived in the present ‘information’ age of ease of travel, broad cosmopolitan exposure to people, cultures and religions, complete with accurate and objective information on the Islamic religion, would his choice have been any different? It is an interesting thought. What would a man have done who, as previously quoted, stated, “I protest that if some great Power would agree to make me always think what is true and do what is right, on condition of being turned into a sort of clock and wound up every morning before I got out of bed, I should instantly close with the offer.”<sup>7</sup> To such a man, the comprehensive canon of Islam may have been not only appealing, but welcome.

This section began with the assertion that Agnosticism coexists with most religions of established doctrine. Doctrinal adherents can be divided into functional sub-categories on this basis. For example, the Theistic (Orthodox) Christians who conceive the reality of God to be provable, the Gnostic Christians who conceive knowledge of the truth of God to be reserved for the spiritual elite, and the Agnostic Christians, who maintain faith while admitting inability to prove the reality of God. The distinguishing difference between these various subgroups exists not in the presence, but in attempts at justification, of faith.

Similarly, most religions can be sub-divided by the manner in which individual adherents attempt to justify faith within the confines of doctrine. At the end of the day, however, these divisions are of academic interest only, for the how or why of belief does not alter the presence of belief any more than the how or why of God alters His existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Huxley, Thomas H. *Discourse Touching The Method of Using One’s Reason Rightly and of Seeking Scientific Truth.*

To return to Francis Bacon, he once opined, “They are ill discoverers that think there is no land, when they can see nothing but sea.”<sup>8</sup> Believers would offer advice to Atheists and Agnostics alike that God exists, whether seen or not, whether desired or not, whether considered proven or not. Argument to the contrary is just a distraction from a reality which will unfold as undeniable truth on a future day of joy for some, deep regret and horror for others.

A great many people need not await the Day of Judgement to entertain such a conclusion, for all people faced with insurmountable trials find themselves drawn to belief, for when faced with desperate circumstances, Who else do people instinctively call upon other than God? Although few make good on the promises of fidelity made at such moments of desperate appeal, the evidence of the oath remains long after the promises to God are cast aside to lie neglected in the gutters of the memory.

Can anybody help the insincere? Very likely not. The concept of recognizing God and living in satisfaction of His commandments only when, and for as long as, it suits one’s purpose, demonstrates an unwillingness to submit on God’s terms. Take, for example, St. Augustine’s pathetic prayer, “*Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.* (Give me chastity and continency—but not yet!)”<sup>9</sup> Here’s the prayer of a ‘Saint?’ who on one hand was praying to God, and on the other hand wasn’t ready to leave the houses of prostitution, to the compromise of his sexual incontinency. Compare this with the exemplary lives of the disciples of Jesus, who are reported to have deserted infinitely more honorable pursuits when called to follow Christ Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Bacon, Francis. *Advancement of Learning*. I.vii.5.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. viii, ch. 7

These men left their worldly priorities, such as their livelihood of fishing and their obligation of burying the dead, when the truth came to them, without delay to a time of greater personal convenience. The religious might be inclined to comment, “Wow! Those are my kind of guys!” The more important understanding, however, is that those appear to be *God’s* ‘kind of guys.’

Of course, that was then and this is now. In the present age prophets walk on water, heal lepers, and bid mankind to follow only in the imaginations of those with a view to history. All the same, a lot of people still seek the truth of God and, once recognized, will follow immediately, regardless of the sacrifice required. But first, they must know the truth with certainty.

So what’s the problem? Simply this: information has never been so readily available, and yet (on the surface at least) never so confusing and religiously obstructive. Most people have been raised with the intellectual tools to root out and identify the inconsistencies and fallacies of the religions predominant within their exposure. Sincere seekers log a certain depth of experience in discrediting various faiths, a few of which are truly twitty cults, but the majority of which are sects claiming to be based upon some version of the Old or New Testaments, but in fact diverging from the balanced and fundamental teachings found therein. After a while, one sect begins to look very much like the others, many times with only shallow doctrinal differences, and almost always with the same questionable foundation. Most such sects have evolved to a modern conglomerate of truths, half-truths (or in other words, half-lies) and solid unadulterated deception. The problem is, mixing truth with falsehood is like mixing beauty with ugliness -- it doesn’t work. Any one particular

religion is either entirely truthful or to some degree impure. And since God doesn't error -- not even once -- if people can't trust one element of that which is presented as revelation, how can they know which teachings *can* be trusted? Furthermore, many of the religious have difficulty conceiving that God would leave humankind to hang the hereafter on an impure understanding of Him.

The problem screams in the doctrine-stuffed ears of man that a person cannot mix truth with falsehood and continue to consider the blend to originate from God any more than a person can mix loveliness and ugliness and continue to win beauty pageants. Place a single, hairy, multilobulated mole (not a beauty mark, but a true *ugly* mark) smack dab in the middle of any picture of facial perfection and what does a person get? Pure, unadulterated 'Angelic' beauty? On the contrary, the end result is the all too human reality of beauty marred.

Place the tiniest of falsehoods in a religion, which is reported to be from a perfect and flawless God, and what is the result? A lot of sincere people walking, for one. But for those who wish to hang on to the canon of a flawed belief system, apologists assume the role of religious cosmetic surgeons. These apologists may succeed in smoothing the uneven surface of scripture by way of doctrinal dermabrasion, but anybody with depth of insight recognizes that the foundational genetics remain faulty. Consequently, while some see straight through the lame attempts at excusing the absurd, many follow anyway.

Amongst those who do choose to embrace a faith, many arrive at their choice by throwing up their hands in frustration and choosing whatever religion suits best or,

at the very minimum, offends least. Some file a telepathic communiqué with God to the effect that they are doing the best they can, others rest comfortably on insecure conclusions. Many become Agnostic with regard to all doctrinal faiths, pursuing an internal, personal faith for lack of exposure to a doctrinal belief which is pure and consistently Godly.

Refusal to compromise belief in a perfect and infallible God for a ‘settle for’ religion possessing shaky foundation and demonstrable doctrinal weaknesses is understandable – respectable even. After generations of distracting family traditions, centuries of confounding cultural misdirection, and a lifetime of prejudiced propaganda, many Westerners have become spiritually immobilized. On one hand the concept of a pristine, pure religion devoid of adulteration, corruption and, in short, the grimy and fallible hand of religion-engineering man is much sought after, but elusive to Western consciousness. On the other hand, many see too clearly the inconsistencies of any present day religion founded on that with which the West is most familiar—namely the Jewish and Christian Bibles. Some may remain trapped within the narrow confine defined by the horn-tips of this dilemma. Others look deeply into Biblical scriptures and recognize that as the Old Testament predicted the coming of John the Baptist, Christ Jesus and one remaining prophet, so did Christ Jesus predict a prophet to follow himself—one who would bring a message of truth to make all things clear.

Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, and a variety of other Christian sects claim to fulfill this prophecy with the founder of their flavor of belief. Many others are skeptical and still searching. It is for the latter that my books have been written.