

Huxley And Agnosticism (1889)

By Robert Green Ingersoll

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In the February number of the Nineteenth Century, 1889, is an article by Professor Huxley, entitled "Agnosticism." It seems that a church congress was held at Manchester in October, 1888, and that the Principal of King's College brought the topic of Agnosticism before the assembly and made the following statement:

But if this be so, for a man to urge as an escape from this article of belief that he has no means of a scientific knowledge of an unseen world, or of the future, is irrelevant. His difference from Christians lies, not in the fact that he has no knowledge of these things, but that he does not believe the authority on which they are stated. He may prefer to call himself an Agnostic, but his real name is an older one -- he is an infidel; that is to say, an unbeliever. The word infidel, perhaps, carries an unpleasant significance. Perhaps it is right that it should. It is, and it ought to be, an unpleasant thing for a man to have to say plainly that he does not believe in Jesus Christ.

Let us examine this statement, putting it in language that is easily understood; and for that purpose we will divide it into several paragraphs,

First, -- "For a man to urge that he has no means of a scientific knowledge of the unseen world, or of the future, is irrelevant."

Is there any other knowledge than a scientific knowledge? Are there several kinds of knowing? Is there such a thing as scientific ignorance? If a man says, "I know nothing of the unseen world because I have no knowledge upon that subject," is the fact that he has no knowledge absolutely irrelevant? Will the Principal of King's College say that having no knowledge is the reason he knows? When asked to give your opinion upon any subject, can it be said that your ignorance of that subject is irrelevant? If this be true, then your knowledge of the subject is also irrelevant?

Is it possible to put in ordinary English a more perfect absurdity? How can a man obtain any knowledge of the unseen world? He certainly cannot obtain it through the medium of the senses. It is not a world that he can visit. He cannot stand upon its shores, nor can he view them from the ocean of imagination. The Principal of King's College, however, insists that these impossibilities are irrelevant.

No person has come back from the unseen world. No authentic message has been delivered. Through all the centuries, not one whisper has broken the silence that lies

beyond the grave. Countless millions have sought for some evidence, have listened in vain for some word.

It is most cheerfully admitted that all this does not prove the non-existence of another world -- all this does not demonstrate that death ends all. But it is the justification of the Agnostic, who candidly says, "I do not know."

Second. -- "The Principal of King's College states that the difference between an Agnostic and a Christian "lies, not in the fact that he has no knowledge of these things, but that he does not believe the authority on which they are stated."

Is this a difference in knowledge, or a difference in belief -- that is to say, a difference in credulity?

The Christian believes the Mosaic account. He reverently hears and admits the truth of all that he finds within the Scriptures. Is this knowledge? How is it possible to know whether the reputed authors of the books of the Old Testament were the real ones? The witnesses are dead. The lips that could testify are dust. Between these shores roll the waves of many centuries. Who knows whether such a man as Moses existed or not? Who knows the author of kings and Chronicles? By what testimony can we substantiate the authenticity of the prophets, or of the prophecies, or of the fulfillments? Is there any difference between the knowledge of the Christian and of the Agnostic? Does the Principal of King's College know any more as to the truth of the Old Testament than the man who modestly calls for evidence? Has not a mistake been made? Is not the difference one of belief instead of knowledge? And is not this difference founded on the difference in credulity? Would not an infinitely wise and good being -- where belief is a condition to salvation -- supply the evidence? Certainly the Creator of man -- if such exist -- knows the exact nature of the human mind -- knows the evidence necessary to convince; and, consequently, such a being would act in accordance with such conditions.

There is a relation between evidence and belief. The mind is so constituted that certain things, being in accordance with its nature, are regarded as reasonable, as probable.

There is also this fact that must not be overlooked: that is, that just in the proportion that the brain is developed it requires more evidence, and becomes less and less credulous. Ignorance and credulity go hand in hand. Intelligence understands something of the law of average, has an idea of probability. It is not swayed by prejudice, neither is it driven to extremes by suspicion. It takes into consideration personal motives. It examines the character of the witnesses, makes allowance for the ignorance of the time, -- for enthusiasm, for fear, -- and comes to its conclusion without fear and without passion.

What knowledge has the Christian of another world? The senses of the Christian are the same as those of the Agnostic. He hears, sees, and feels substantially the same. His vision is limited. He sees no other shore and hears nothing from another world.

Knowledge is something that can be imparted. It has a foundation in fact. It comes within the domain of the senses. It can be told, described, analyzed, and, in addition to all this, it can be classified. Whenever a fact becomes the property of one mind, it can become the property of the intellectual world. There are words in which the knowledge can be conveyed.

The Christian is not a supernatural person, filled with supernatural truths. He is a natural person, and all that he knows of value can be naturally imparted. It is within his power to give all that he has to the Agnostic.

The Principal of King's College is mistaken when he says that the difference between the Agnostic and the Christian does not lie in the fact that the Agnostic has no knowledge, I but that he does not believe the authority on which these things are stated."

The real difference is this: the Christian says that he has knowledge; the Agnostic admits that he has none; and yet the Christian accuses the Agnostic of arrogance, and asks him how he has the impudence to admit the limitations of his mind. To the Agnostic every fact is a torch, and by this light, and this light only, he walks.

It is also true that the Agnostic does not believe the authority relied on by the Christian. What is the authority of the Christian? Thousands of years ago it is supposed that certain men, or, rather, uncertain men, wrote certain things. It is alleged by the Christian that these men were divinely inspired, and that the words of these men are to be taken as absolutely true, no matter whether or not they are verified by modern discovery and demonstration.

How can we know that any human being was divinely inspired? There has been no personal revelation to us to the effect that certain people were inspired -- it is only claimed that the revelation was to them. For this we have only their word, and about that there is this difficulty: we know nothing of them, and, consequently, cannot, if we desire, rely upon their character for truth. This evidence is not simply hearsay -- it is far weaker than that. We have only been told that they said these things; we do not know whether the persons claiming to be inspired wrote these things or not; neither are we certain that such persons ever existed. We know now that the greatest men with whom we are acquainted are often mistaken about the simplest matters. We also know that men saying something like the same things, in other countries and in ancient days, must have been impostors, The Christian has no confidence in the words of Mohammed; the Mohammedan cares nothing about the declarations of Buddha; and the Agnostic gives to the words of the Christian the value only of the truth that is in them. He knows that these sayings get neither truth nor worth from the person who uttered them. He knows that the sayings themselves get their entire value from the truth they express. So that the real difference between the Christian and the Agnostic does not lie in their knowledge, -- for neither of them has any knowledge on this subject, -- but the difference does lie in credulity, and in nothing else. The Agnostic does not rely on the authority of Moses and the prophets. He finds that they were mistaken in most matters capable of demonstration. He finds that their mistakes multiply in the proportion that human knowledge increases. He is satisfied

that the religion of the ancient Jews is, in most things, as ignorant and cruel as other religions of the ancient world. He concludes that the efforts, in all ages, to answer the questions of origin and destiny, and to account for the phenomena of life, have all been substantial failures.

In the presence of demonstration there is no opportunity for the exercise of faith. Truth does not appeal to credulity -- it appeals to evidence, to established facts, to the constitution of the mind. It endeavors to harmonize the new fact with all that we know, and to bring it within the circumference of human experience.

The church has never cultivated investigation. It has never said: Let him who has a mind to think, think; but its cry from the first until now has been: Let him who has ears to hear, hear.

The pulpit does not appeal to the reason of the pew; it speaks by authority and it commands the pew to believe, and it not only commands, but it threatens.

The Agnostic knows that the testimony of man is not sufficient to establish what is known as the miraculous. We would not believe to-day the testimony of millions to the effect that the dead had been raised. The church itself would be the first to attack such testimony. If we cannot believe those whom we know, why should we believe witnesses who have been dead thousands of years, and about whom we know nothing?

Third. -- "The Principal of King's College, growing. Somewhat severe, declares that "he may prefer to call himself an Agnostic, but his real name is an older one -- he is an infidel; that is to say, an unbeliever."

This is spoken in a kind of holy scorn. According to this gentleman, an unbeliever is, to a certain extent, a disreputable person.

In this sense, what is an unbeliever? He is one whose mind is so constituted that what the Christian calls evidence is not satisfactory to him. Is a person accountable for the constitution of his mind, for the formation of his brain? Is any human being responsible for the weight that evidence has upon him? Can he believe without evidence? Is the weight of evidence a question of choice? Is there such a thing as honestly weighing testimony? Is the result of such weighing necessary? Does it involve moral responsibility? If the Mosaic account does not convince a man that it is true, is he a wretch because he is candid enough to tell the truth? Can he preserve his manhood only by making a false statement?

The Mohammedan would call the Principal of King's College an unbeliever, -- so would the tribes of Central Africa, -- and he would return the compliment, and all would be equally justified. Has the Principal of King's College any knowledge that he keeps from the rest of the world? Has he the confidence of the Infinite? Is there anything praiseworthy in believing where the evidence is sufficient, or is one to be praised for believing only where the evidence is insufficient? Is a man to be blamed for not agreeing

with his fellow-citizen? Were the unbelievers in the pagan world better or worse than their neighbors? It is probably true that some of the greatest Greeks believed in the gods of that nation, and it is equally true that some of the greatest denied their existence. If credulity is a virtue now, it must have been in the days of Athens. If to believe without evidence entitles one to eternal reward in this century, certainly the same must have been true in the days of the Pharaohs.

An infidel is one who does not believe in the prevailing religion. We now admit that the infidels of Greece and Rome were right. The gods that they refused to believe in are dead. Their thrones are empty, and long ago the scepters dropped from their nerveless hands. To-day the world honors the men who denied and derided these gods.

Fourth. -- "The Principal of King's College ventures to suggest that "the word infidel, perhaps, carries an unpleasant significance; perhaps it is right that it should."

A few years ago the word infidel did carry "an unpleasant significance." A few years ago its significance was so unpleasant that the man to whom the word was applied found himself in prison or at the stake. In particularly kind communities he was put in the stocks, pelted with offal, derided by hypocrites, scorned by ignorance, jeered by cowardice, and all the priests passed by on the other side.

There was a time when Episcopalians were regarded as infidels; when a true Catholic looked upon a follower of Henry VIII. as an infidel, as an unbeliever; when a true Catholic held in detestation the man who preferred a murderer and adulterer -- a man who swapped religions for the sake of exchanging wives -- to the Pope, the head of the universal church.

It is easy enough to conceive of an honest man denying the claims of a church based on the caprice of an English king. The word infidel "carries an unpleasant significance " only where the Christians are exceedingly ignorant, intolerant, bigoted, cruel, and unmannerly.

The real gentleman gives to others the rights that he claims for himself. The civilized man rises far above the bigotry of one who has been "born again." Good breeding is far gentler than "universal love."

It is natural for the church to hate an unbeliever -- natural for the pulpit to despise one who refuses to subscribe, who refuses to give. It is a question of revenue instead of religion. The Episcopal Church has the instinct of self-preservation. It uses its power, its influence, to compel contribution. It forgives the giver.

Fifth -- "The Principal of King's College insists that "it is, and it ought to be, an unpleasant thing for a man to have to say plainly that he does not believe in Jesus Christ."

Should it be an unpleasant thing for a man to say plainly what he believes? Can this be unpleasant except in an uncivilized community -- a Community in which an uncivilized church has authority?

Why should not a man be as free to say that he does not believe as to say that he does believe? Perhaps the real question is whether all men have an equal right to express their opinions. Is it the duty of the minority to keep silent? Are majorities always right? If the minority had never spoken, what to-day would have been the condition of this world? Are the majority the pioneers of progress, or does the pioneer, as a rule, walk alone? Is it his duty to close his lips? Must the inventor allow his inventions to die in the brain? Must the discoverer of new truths make of his mind a tomb? Is man under any obligation to his fellows? Was the Episcopal religion always in the majority? Was it at any time in the history of the world an unpleasant thing to be called a Protestant? Did the word Protestant "carry an unpleasant significance"? Was it perhaps right that it should"? Was Luther a misfortune to the human race?

If a community is thoroughly civilized, why should it be an unpleasant thing for a man to express his belief in respectful language? If the argument is against him, it might be unpleasant; but why should simple numbers be the foundation of unpleasantness? If the majority have the facts, -- if they have the argument, -- why should they fear the mistakes of the minority? Does any theologian hate the man he can answer?

It is claimed by the Episcopal Church that Christ was in fact God; and it is further claimed that the New Testament is an inspired account of what that being and his disciples did and said. Is there any obligation resting on any human being to believe this account? Is it within the power of man to determine the influence that testimony shall have upon his mind?

If one denies the existence of devils, does he, for that reason, cease to believe in Jesus Christ? Is it not possible to imagine that a great and tender soul living in Palestine nearly twenty centuries ago was misunderstood? Is it not within the realm of the possible that his words have been inaccurately reported? Is it not within the range of the probable that legend and rumor and ignorance and zeal have deformed his life and belittled his character?

If the man Christ lived and taught and suffered, if he was, in reality, great and noble, who is his friend -- the one who attributes to him feats of jugglery, or he who maintains that these stories were invented by zealous ignorance and believed by enthusiastic credulity?

If he claimed to have wrought miracles, he must have been either dishonest or insane; consequently, he who denies miracles does what little he can to rescue the reputation of a great and splendid man.

The Agnostic accepts the good he did, the truth he said, and rejects only that which, according to his judgment, is inconsistent with truth and goodness.

The Principal of King's College evidently believes in the necessity of belief. He puts conviction or creed or credulity in place of character. According to his idea, it is impossible to win the approbation of God by intelligent investigation and by the

expression of honest conclusions. He imagines that the Infinite is delighted with credulity, with belief without evidence, faith without question.

Man has but little reason, at best; but this little should be used. No matter how small the taper is, how feeble the ray of light it casts, it is better than darkness, and no man should be rewarded for extinguishing the light he has.

We know now, if we know anything, that man in this, the nineteenth century, is better capable of judging as to the happening of any event, than he ever was before. We know that the standard is higher to-day -- we know that the intellectual light is greater -- we know that the human mind is better equipped to deal with all questions of human interest, than at any other time within the known history of the human race.

It will not do to say that "our Lord and his apostles must at least be regarded as honest men." Let this be admitted, and what does it prove? Honesty is not enough. Intelligence and honesty must go hand in hand. We may admit now that "our Lord and his apostles" were perfectly honest men; yet it does not follow that we have a truthful account of what they said and of what they did. It is not pretended that "our Lord" wrote anything, and it is not known that one of the apostles ever wrote a word. Consequently, the most that we can say is that somebody has written something about "our Lord and his apostles." Whether that somebody knew or did not know is unknown to us. As to whether what is written is true or false, we must judge by that which is written.

First of all, is it probable? is it within the experience of mankind? We should judge of the gospels as we judge of other histories, of other biographies. We know that many biographies written by perfectly honest men are not correct. We know, if we know anything, that honest men can be mistaken, and it is not necessary to believe everything that a man writes because we believe he was honest. Dishonest men may write the truth.

At last the standard or criterion is for each man to judge according to what he believes to be human experience. We are satisfied that nothing more wonderful has happened than is now happening. We believe that the present is as wonderful as the past, and just as miraculous as the future. If we are to believe in the truth of the Old Testament, the word evidence loses its meaning; there ceases to be any standard of probability, and the mind simply accepts or denies without reason.

We are told that certain miracles were performed for the purpose of attesting the mission and character of Christ. How can these miracles be verified? The miracles of the Middle Ages rest upon substantially the same evidence. The same may be said of the wonders of all countries and of all ages. How is it a virtue to deny the miracles of Mohammed and to believe those attributed to Christ?

You may say of St. Augustine that what he said was true or false. We know that much of it was false; and yet we are not justified in saying that he was dishonest. Thousands of errors have been propagated by honest men. As a rule, mistakes get their wings from honest people. The testimony of a witness to the happening of the impossible gets no

weight from the honesty of the witness. The fact that falsehoods are in the New Testament does not tend to prove that the writers were knowingly untruthful. No man can be honest enough to substantiate, to the satisfaction of reasonable men, the happening of a miracle.

For this reason it makes not the slightest difference whether the writers of the New Testament were honest or not. Their character is not involved. Whenever a man rises above his contemporaries, whenever he excites the wonder of his fellows, his biographers always endeavor to bridge over the chasm between the people and this man, and for that purpose attribute to him the qualities which in the eyes of the multitude are desirable.

Miracles are demanded by savages, and, consequently, the savage biographer attributes miracles to his hero. What would we think now of a man who, in writing the life of Charles Darwin, should attribute to him supernatural powers? What would we say of an admirer of Humboldt who should claim that the great German could cast out devils? We would feel that Darwin and Humboldt had been belittled; that the biographies were written for children and by men who had not outgrown the nursery.

If the reputation of "our Lord" is to be preserved -- if he is to stand with the great and splendid of the earth -- if he is to continue a constellation in the intellectual heavens, all claim to the miraculous, to the supernatural, must be abandoned.

No one can overestimate the evils that have been endured by the human race by reason of a departure from the standard of the natural. The world has been governed by jugglery, by sleight-of-hand. Miracles, wonders, tricks, have been regarded as of far greater importance than the steady, the sublime and unbroken march, of cause and effect. The improbable has been established by the impossible. Falsehood has furnished the foundation for faith.

Is the human body at present the residence of evil spirits, or have these imps of darkness perished from the world? Where are they? If the New Testament establishes anything, it is the existence of innumerable devils, and that these satanic beings absolutely took possession of the human mind. Is this true? Can anything be more absurd? Does any intellectual man who has examined the question believe that depraved demons live in the bodies of men? Do they occupy space? Do they live upon some kind of food? Of what shape are they? Could they be classified by a naturalist? Do they run or float or fly? If to deny the existence of these supposed beings is to be an infidel, how can the word infidel carry an unpleasant significance"?

Of course it is the business of the principals of most colleges, as well as of bishops, cardinals, popes, priests, and clergymen to insist upon the existence of evil spirits. All these gentlemen are employed to counteract the influence of these supposed demons. Why should they take the bread out of their own mouths? Is it to be expected that they will unfrock themselves?

The church, like any other corporation, has the instinct of self-preservation. It will defend itself it will fight as long as it has the power to change a hand into a fist.

The Agnostic takes the ground that human experience is the basis of morality. Consequently, it is of no importance who wrote the gospels, or who vouched or vouches for the genuineness of the miracles. In his scheme of life these things are utterly unimportant. He is satisfied that "the miraculous" is the impossible. He knows that the witnesses were wholly incapable of examining the questions involved, that credulity had possession of their minds, that "the miraculous" was expected, that it was their daily food.

All this is very clearly and delightfully stated by Professor Huxley, and it hardly seems possible that any intelligent man can read what he says without feeling that the foundation of all superstition has been weakened. The article is as remarkable for its candor as for its clearness. Nothing is avoided -- everything is met. No excuses are given. He has left all apologies for the other side. When you have finished what Professor Huxley has written, you feel that your mind has been in actual contact with the mind of another, that nothing has been concealed; and not only so, but you feel that this mind is not only willing, but anxious, to know the actual truth.

To me, the highest uses of philosophy are, first, to free the mind of fear, and, second, to avert all the evil that can be averted, through intelligence -- that is to say, through a knowledge of the conditions of well-being.

We are satisfied that the absolute is beyond our vision, beneath our touch, above our reach. We are now convinced that we can deal only with phenomena, with relations, with appearances, with things that impress the senses, that can be reached by reason, by the exercise of our faculties. We are satisfied that the reasonable road is "the straight road," the only "sacred way.

Of course there is faith in the world -- faith in this world -- and always will be, unless superstition succeeds in every land. But the faith of the wise man is based upon facts. His faith is a reasonable conclusion drawn from the known. He has faith in the progress of the race, in the triumph of intelligence, in the coming sovereignty of science. He has faith in the development of the brain, in the gradual enlightenment of the mind. And so he works for the accomplishment of great ends, having faith in the final victory of the race.

He has honesty enough to say that he does not know. He perceives and admits that the mind has limitations. He doubts the so-called wisdom of the past. He looks for evidence, and he endeavors to keep his mind free from prejudice. He believes in the manly virtues, in the judicial spirit, and in his obligation to tell his honest thoughts.

It is useless to talk about a destruction of consolations. That which is suspected to be untrue loses its power to console. A man should be brave enough to bear the truth.

Professor Huxley has stated with great clearness the attitude of the Agnostic. It seems that he is somewhat severe on the Positive Philosophy. While it is hard to see the propriety of worshiping Humanity as a being, it is easy to understand the splendid dream of August Comte. Is the human race worthy to be worshiped by itself -- that is to say, should the individual worship himself? Certainly the religion of humanity is better than the religion of the inhuman. The Positive Philosophy is better far than Catholicism. It does not fill the heavens with monsters, nor the future with pain.

It maybe said that Luther and Comte endeavored to reform the Catholic Church. Both were mistaken, because the only reformation of which that church is capable is destruction. It is a mass of superstition.

The mission of Positivism is, in the language of its founder "to generalize science and to systematize society." It seems to me that Comte stated with great force and with absolute truth the three phases of intellectual evolution or progress.

First -- "In the supernatural phase the mind seeks causes -- aspires to know the essence of things, and the How and Why of their operation. In this phase, all facts are regarded as the productions of supernatural agents, and unusual phenomena are interpreted as the signs of the pleasure or displeasure of some god."

Here at this point is the orthodox world of to-day. The church still imagines that phenomena should be interpreted as the signs of the pleasure or displeasure of God. Nearly every history is deformed with this childish and barbaric view.

Second. -- "The next phase or modification, according to Comte, is the metaphysical. "The supernatural agents are dispensed with, and in their places we find abstract forces or entities supposed to inhere in substances and capable of engendering phenomena."

In this phase people talk about laws and principles as though laws and principles were forces capable of producing phenomena.

Third. -- "The last stage is the Positive. The mind, convinced of the futility of all enquiry into causes and essences, restricts itself to the observation and classification of phenomena, and to the discovery of the invariable relations of succession and similitude - - in a word, to the discovery of the relations of phenomena."

Why is not the Positive stage the point reached by the Agnostic? He has ceased to inquire into the origin of things. He has perceived the limitations of the mind. He is thoroughly convinced of the uselessness and futility and absurdity of theological methods, and restricts himself to the examination of phenomena, to their relations, to their effects, and endeavors to find in the complexity of things the true conditions of human happiness.

Although I am not a believer in the philosophy of Auguste Comte, I cannot shut my eyes to the value of his thought; neither is it possible for me not to applaud his candor, his

intelligence, and the courage it required even to attempt to lay the foundation of the Positive Philosophy.

Professor Huxley and Frederic Harrison are splendid soldiers in the army of Progress. They have attacked with signal success the sacred and solemn stupidities of superstition. Both have appealed to that which is highest and noblest in man. Both have been the destroyers of prejudice. Both have shed light, and both have won great victories on the fields of intellectual conflict. They cannot afford to waste time in attacking each other.

After all, the Agnostic and the Positivist have the same end in view -- both believe in living for this world.

The theologians, finding themselves unable to answer the arguments that have been urged, resort to the old subterfuge -- to the old cry that Agnosticism takes something of value from the life of man. Does the Agnostic take any consolation from the world? Does he blot out, or dim, one star in the heaven of hope? Can there be anything more consoling than to feel, to know, that Jehovah is not God -- that the message of the Old Testament is not from the infinite?

Is it not enough to fill the brain with a happiness unspeakable to know that the words, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire," will never be spoken to one of the children of men?

Is it a small thing to lift from the shoulders of industry the burdens of superstition? Is it a little thing to drive the monster of fear from the hearts of men?

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Bank Of Wisdom

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