

[1964. In *Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

**AGNOSTICISM.** From antiquity the term *skepticism* has been applied to the general denial of the possibility of knowledge. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Huxley invented the term *agnosticism* to signify a religious rather than a general skepticism. Though etymologically applicable to any subject, it ordinarily means the refusal either to assert or to deny the existence of God. Theism asserts, atheism denies; agnosticism professes ignorance.

In addition to Huxley, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Sir William Hamilton, and Herbert Spencer are well-known modern agnostics. Kant, for example, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, subjects the traditional arguments for the existence of God to an intricate scrutiny. When he concludes that they are all fallacious, he and lesser agnostics point out that this is not atheism. Kant has not proved the non-existence of God; he has merely shown that the existence of God remains unproven.

There is a certain advantage in an agnostic position. In the first place, it avoids the odium of atheism. In the past, in pagan antiquity as well as in the Christian culture of W Europe, atheism stood in such disrepute that those who were inclined to the view took some pains to disguise it. Spinoza, for example, used the term *God* profusely, but by it he only meant the universe. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when others besides Communists are more willing than formerly to deny the existence of God, they prefer softer terms, such as naturalism and humanism. Agnosticism avoids this embarrassment.

In the second place, it avoids the burden of proof. A theist, or anyone who asserts anything, must give reasons of some sort for his assertion. A man who professes ignorance needs no reasons. Therefore, no argument can refute the simple confession, "I don't know."

However, in spite of the modest language of some agnostics, more is involved than such a simple profession of ignorance. Kant's point was not merely that he remained unconvinced; nor was it even that the arguments he scrutinized were unsound; but rather, Kant and most of the others argue that God, if there be a God, is completely unknowable. There is a distinction between the unknown and the unknowable. Not only are there items unknown to one person though well known to another; but who can doubt that there are many truths not known to anyone now but which will be discovered in the future? For the agnostics, however, God will never be discovered. No proof of His existence will be valid. He will forever remain unknown, for He is unknowable.

The reason that God is asserted to be unknowable is always some theory of epistemology. Kant professed to show the limits of human reason. All knowledge is a combination of the a priori forms of the mind and the contents of sensory experience. The a priori categories, which make thinking possible, are inapplicable beyond the sphere of sensation; therefore, since God is supposed to be pure spirit, the

human mind cannot legitimately regard Him as one, as a substance, as a cause, or as a necessary being. Nor can His existence ever be proved, for all existential assertions depend on sensory verification. If other agnostics, like Spencer, do not precisely follow Kant's epistemology, they offer other reasons for circumscribing human intelligence.

This type of agnosticism, unlike the simpler form, does not escape all burden of proof. First, the criticisms of the traditional arguments must themselves be justified. But Kant would have little trouble on this point. Second, it would also be necessary to show that no other proofs could be devised. Again, this is not too difficult—within the prescribed epistemological limitation that knowledge must always have a sensory content. Therefore, in the third place, the agnostic must maintain that so-called natural theology is the only hope of knowing God. In particular, knowledge by revelation would have to be ruled out.

At this point the agnostic, even of Kant's type, seems to be reduced to the earlier simplicity of a bare profession of ignorance; for it would be difficult to prove by argument that God, if there be a God, could not reveal Himself, and, if He be omnipotent, could not make man understand the revelation. No doubt the Christian scholar has some obligation to analyze Kant's and Spencer's theories of epistemology, but chiefly he has on his hands not so much an argument that needs analysis and refutation as a person professing ignorance, toward whom some attitude must be adopted.

With respect to one's attitude toward agnostics as persons, it was Blaise Pascal who made a noteworthy distinction between two types. The first type consists of those few who consider their ignorance of God a misfortune to be remedied as soon as possible. They groan in their doubt and make the search for God their most serious occupation. For these people Pascal has the greatest compassion.

There are other agnostics, probably the majority, who enjoy their doubt and even boast of it. They are content not only to be ignorant of their origin but, what is worse, to be ignorant of their destiny as well. They make no effort to determine their possibilities in a life beyond the grave; they have no interest in eternity; they refuse to retain a thought of God in their minds. Such people Pascal holds in contempt, not out of pious zeal, but because they are so callous even to reasonable self-interest.

To return to the logic of the situation, it is now clear that agnosticism is in practice indistinguishable from atheism.

If, among Swiss villagers who are warned of an imminent avalanche, there are some who refuse to leave their homes and seek safety, it cannot be because of simple agnosticism. A reasonable man would investigate whether or not the warning is justified. If then he stays in his house

while others flee, it could not reasonably be because he does not know whether or not an avalanche is coming; it must be because he definitely believes that an avalanche is not coming. And even if he half believes that an avalanche might come, but that it is safe to defer escape until the day after tomorrow, his destruction by the avalanche that very night is indistinguishable from the destruction of one who maintains an avalanche will never come at all.

Pascal therefore proposes a wager, Either God exists or He does not. The agnostic professes that human reason cannot decide which alternative is true. But one must be true, the other must be false. Which one will you accept? The agnostic cannot refuse to make a decision; he cannot refuse to wager; he is already wagering. Whether he lives or dies, he either believes in God or he does not.

Now, if he does not believe in God, and he wins, he gains nothing. If he does not believe in God, and he loses, he loses eternal blessedness. The agnostic therefore has nothing to win and everything to lose. If, however, a man wagers on God and loses, he loses nothing; but if he wins, he wins an infinite reward. The believer, therefore, has nothing to lose and everything to win. How then can anyone who is the least interested in his own welfare accept agnosticism?

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