

### CHAPTER III.

#### AGNOSTICISM AND EVOLUTION.

##### Nature and Scope of Agnosticism.

A MORE popular form of error than Monism, or scientific Atheism, and one which is more wide-spread and devastating in its effects, is the new-fangled system, if system it can be called, known as Agnosticism. To the superficial student it is not without color of plausibility, and by concealing the objectionable and repulsive features of Monism, it now counts more adherents, probably, than any other form of scientific error.

Like Monism, Agnosticism is a system of thought which has allied itself with the theory of Evolution, from which, as ordinarily understood, it is inseparable. Like Monism, it is a *mixtum compositum* of science, philosophy and theology, in which science and Evolution are predominant factors. And, like Monism, too, it is a new name for an old form of error. Unlike Monism, however, Agnosticism affects to suspend judgment, where Monism makes a positive assertion, or enters a point-blank denial. In many questions of fundamental importance, Agnosticism is ostensibly nothing more than simple doubt, or gentle skepticism, while Monism is always arrogant, downright affirmation, or negation. In its

(254)

ultimate analysis, however, Agnosticism as well as Monism issues in a practical denial of a personal God, the Creator of the universe, and relegates Providence, the immortality of the soul, and the moral responsibility of man to a Divine Being, to the region of fiction.

Again, Agnosticism, like Monism, is peculiarly and essentially the product of a combination and a succession of causes and conditions. As no one individual can be pointed to as the father of Monism, so no one person can be singled out as the founder of Agnosticism. Both may have, and have had, their recognized exponents; both, like a Greek drama, have their choragi and coryphei, but these exponents, these choragi and coryphei, are not spontaneous growths. They do not, Minerva-like, leap suddenly into the intellectual arena, fully developed and armed cap-a-pie. On the contrary, they are the product of their environment, as affected by a series of antecedent factors and influences. They had their predecessors and prototypes; those who planted the seeds which lay dormant until new conditions favored germination and development. Then the fruit contained in the germ was made manifest, and the poison which had been so surreptitiously instilled, was discovered when it was too late to administer an antidote.

The word "agnostic" was invented by the late Prof. Huxley in 1869. He took it from St. Paul's mention, in the Acts of the Apostles, of the altar erected by the Athenians "to the unknown God," ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ, and, to the inventor's great satisfaction,

the term took, and soon found a recognized position in the languages of all civilized nations.<sup>1</sup>

Late Developments of Agnosticism.

As a creed, or system of philosophy, Huxley derives Agnosticism from the teachings of Kant, Hume and Sir William Hamilton. At an early age his mind, he informs us, "steadily gravitated towards the conclusion" of Kant, who affirms, in his "Kritik der reinen Vernunft," that "the greatest and perhaps the sole use of all philosophy of pure reason is, after all, merely negative, since it serves not as an organon for the enlargement (of knowledge), but as

<sup>1</sup> Father Clarke, S. J., in a note to an interesting series of articles on Agnosticism in *The Month*, for June, July and August, 1882, declares that the term Agnosticism is "an impostor from the Greek vocabulary," and further that "the analogy of other Greek formations is fatal to its claims of recognition." "The word Agnosticism," he tells us, "is founded on a false analogy to Gnosticism. Gnosticism is the doctrine of those who are γνωστικοί, men professing γνώσις, or knowledge. In the same way Agnosticism would be the doctrine of ἀγνωστικοί, or those who profess ἀγνοσία, or ignorance. But ἀγνωστικός is an impossible Greek word. The Greeks never prefix the privative ἀ, or ἀν, to the adjective expressing the possession of a faculty to indicate its absence. If we are reminded of anæsthetic, ἀνασθητικός, as formed on the analogy of agnostic, we answer (1) that it is not a classical Greek word at all; (2) that it means not men who profess want of perception, but that which tends to destroy perception. By a parity of reasoning, agnostic would mean that which tends to destroy or banish knowledge. In this sense we admit the appropriateness of the name."

"Greek philosophers," says Max Müller, "called it [Agnosticism] with a technical name, *Agnoia*, or if they wished to express the proper attitude of mind towards transcendental questions, they called it *Epoche*, i. e., suspense of judgment. During the Middle Ages, exactly the same idea which now goes by the name of Agnosticism, was well known as *Docta Ignorantia*, i. e., the ignorance founded on the knowledge of our ignorance or impotence to grasp anything beyond what is phenomenal." See *Nineteenth Century*, for Dec., 1894, pp. 892-95.

a discipline for its delimitation; and instead of discovering truth, has only the modest merit of preventing error."

The writings of "that prince of agnostics," David Hume, and Sir William Hamilton's essay on *The Philosophy of the Unconditioned*, confirmed Huxley in this view, and stamped upon his mind "the strong conviction that, on even the most solemn and important questions, men are apt to take cunning phrases for answers; and that the limitations of our faculties, in a great number of cases, render real answers to such questions, not merely actually impossible, but theoretically inconceivable."<sup>1</sup>

Huxley, however, although the coiner of the word Agnosticism, and one of its most zealous and popular exponents, is not its coryphæus. This position is held by the philosopher of "the unknowable," Herbert Spencer, who has done far more than any other one person to establish what might be called a school of agnostic philosophy. When it is remembered that Spencer is likewise the philosopher of Evolution, "our great philosopher," as Darwin calls him, we can see what an intimate connection there must be between Evolution, as a scientific theory, and Agnosticism as a system of philosophy.

But if Spencer is the coryphæus of modern Agnosticism, who was his choragus, who was the teacher and the fautor-in-chief, of the system of thought which he has developed at such length in his numerous volumes on science and philosophy?

<sup>1</sup> "Collected Essays," by T. H. Huxley, vol. V, p. 236.

Strange as it may appear, Spencer's master was none other than an Anglican divine, whose orthodoxy and loyalty to the established church of England were never suspected, and who, at the time of his death, held the honorable position of dean of St. Paul's, London. The name of this divine was Dean Mansel, one of the most distinguished theologians and metaphysicians of England in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The germs of modern Agnosticism, according to Spencer's showing, are unequivocally contained in Mansel's Bampton "Lectures on the Limits of Religious Thought," delivered in the University of Oxford in 1859. In one sentence he stated by implication, if not directly, all that Spencer has developed in his "First Principles," and supplied, as it were, the charter for all the extreme forms of Agnosticism which have had such a vogue during the past generation, and whose progress has been marked with such dire results to faith, not only in Great Britain, but also throughout the entire Christian world.

"Of the nature and attributes of God in his infinite being, philosophy," asserts Mansel, "can tell us nothing; of man's inability to apprehend that nature, and why he is thus unable, she tells us all that we can know, and all that we need to know."<sup>1</sup>

God being thus separated from His creatures by an impassable gulf, it is useless for us to attempt to investigate His nature and attributes. No knowledge that we can acquire of God will satisfy the demands

<sup>1</sup>Lecture VIII, p. 126.

of philosophy, or be capable "of reduction to an ultimate and absolute truth." The only response that may be given to our inquiries, "the only voice which sounds back from the abyss where dwells the Being whom we designate as the Absolute and the Infinite, is a solemn warning that we possess no faculties which qualify us for the attainment of any knowledge of God."

This, in brief, is Manselism, the elimination of God from the domain of human knowledge, and a substitution, in its place, of a dreary, hopeless, derisive skepticism; the abolition of theology as an aimless, bootless pursuit, and the virtual recognition of a dark, blighting, forbidding Atheism.

Mansel, Huxley and Romanes.

There is every reason to believe that Mansel never apprehended the full significance of the destructive principles enunciated in his Bampton lectures. Not so, however, with the enemies of Christianity. They saw, at a glance, the real bearing of the Oxford professor's teachings, and were not slow to give them all the publicity possible.

Spencer quotes from him, at length, in his "First Principles," and makes his declaration the basis of the agnostic philosophy. Huxley, Romanes and others followed in the wake of Spencer, and were not long in bringing the principles of Mansel, as expounded by Spencer, within the comprehension of the general reading public.

Huxley, indeed, has done more, probably, than anyone else to popularize Agnosticism, and by the

majority of readers he is regarded as its chief exponent and defender. He, however, disclaims anything like a creed, and declares that agnostics are precluded from having one by the very nature of their mental status. He prefers to regard Agnosticism, not as a creed, but as "a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle." "Positively," he informs us, "the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable. That I take to be the agnostic faith, which, if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, whatever the future may have in store for him."<sup>1</sup>

The profession of faith of G. J. Romanes is more explicit, at least in so far as it refers to God, and gives us in a few words the views entertained by the two leading classes of agnostics regarding the First Cause, or the Absolute or Unconditioned.

"By Agnosticism," asserts Romanes, "I understand a theory of things which abstains from either affirming or denying the existence of God. It thus represents with regard to Theism a state of suspended judgment; and all it undertakes to affirm is, that upon existing evidence the being of God is unknown. But the term Agnosticism is frequently used in a widely different sense, as implying belief

<sup>1</sup>"Science and Christian Tradition," p. 246.

that the being of God is not merely now unknown, but must always remain unknown."

Docta Ignorantia.

The agnostic creed, then, is a creed based on ignorance rather than on knowledge. We can know nothing that does not come within the range of sense; nothing which we cannot observe with our microscopes, spectrosopes and telescopes, or examine with our scalpels, or test in our alembics and crucibles. Our knowledge is and must be, by the very nature of the case, limited to things material and phenomenal. Every attempt to fathom the mysteries of the super-sensible or spiritual world, if

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Review*, vol. L, p. 59. In his posthumous "Thoughts on Religion," Romanes distinguishes two kinds of Agnosticism, pure and impure, the former held by Huxley, the latter by Spencer. "The modern and convenient term 'Agnosticism,'" writes Romanes, "is used in two very different senses. By its originator, Professor Huxley, it was coined to signify an attitude of reasoned ignorance touching everything that lies beyond the sphere of sense-perception, a professed inability to found valid belief on any other basis. It is in this, its original sense, and also, in my opinion, its only philosophically justifiable sense, that I shall understand the term. But the other, and perhaps more particular sense, in which the word is now employed, is as a correlative of Mr. H. Spencer's doctrine of the unknowable.

"This latter term is philosophically erroneous, implying important negative knowledge, that if there be a God, we know this much about him, that He *cannot* reveal Himself to man. *Pure Agnosticism* is as defined by Huxley." Pp. 107-108.

It is a matter of regret that the lamented author of these "Thoughts on Religion," did not live to complete his work. Not long before his premature death, it is pleasing to record, he recognized the weakness and fallacies of Agnosticism, and returned to "a full and deliberate communion" with the Church of England, from which he had so long been separated. "In his case," writes Canon Gore, "the 'pure in heart' was, after a long period of darkness, allowed in a measure, before his death, to 'see God.'"

there be such a world, or to trace a connection between noumenal cause or phenomenal effect, if there be such a connection, must, we are told, prove useless and abortive. There may or there may not be, a God; we hope there is a God, but we have no warrant for asserting His existence. We cannot affirm either that He is personal or impersonal, intelligent or unintelligent; we cannot say whether He is mind or matter. We cannot, by searching, find Him out, and our every assertion regarding Him is but a contradiction in terms. If there be a Supreme Being, a First Cause, an Absolute Existence, an Ultimate Power; if, in a word, there be a God, He not only is now, but ever must be, unknown and unknowable.

"There may be absolute Truth, but if there is, it is out of our reach. It is possible that there may be a science of realities, of abstract being, of first principles and *a priori* truths, but it is up in the heavens, far above our heads, and we must be content to grovel amid things of earth—to build up as best we can our fragments of empirical knowledge, leaving all else to that future world, in which, in a clear light, if there is ever to be a clearer light for us, we shall know, if there is such a thing as knowledge, the nature and attributes of God, if there is a God, and if His nature can be known, and if His attributes are anything more than a fiction of theologians."<sup>1</sup>

The Duke of Argyll in his interesting work, "The Unity of Nature" well observes that "This fundamental inconsistency in the agnostic philosophy,

<sup>1</sup> *The Month*, vol. XLV, p. 156.

becomes all the more remarkable when we find, that the very men who tell us that we are not one with anything above us, are the same who insist that we are one with everything beneath us. Whatever there is in us or about us which is purely animal, we may see everywhere; but whatever there is in us purely intellectual, or moral, we delude ourselves if we think we see it anywhere. There are abundant homologies between our bodies and the bodies of beasts; but there are no homologies between our minds and any Mind which lives and manifests itself in nature. Our livers and our lungs, our vertebrae and our nervous systems, are identical in origin and in function with those of the living creatures around us; but there is nothing in nature, or above it, which corresponds to our forethought or design or purpose, to our love of the good, or our admiration of the beautiful, to our indignation with the wicked, or to our pity for the suffering or the fallen. I venture to think that no system of philosophy that has ever been taught on earth, lies under such a weight of antecedent improbability; and this improbability increases in direct proportion to the success of science in tracing the unity of nature, and in showing step by step, how its laws and their results can be brought into more direct relation with the mind and intellect of man."<sup>1</sup>

Agnosticism as a *Via Media*.

Agnosticism professes to be a kind of *via media* between Theism and Atheism. It does not deny

<sup>1</sup> P. 166.

the existence of God, but declares that a knowledge of Him is unattainable. Whether He has personality or not; whether He has intelligence or not; whether He is just, holy, omnipotent, omniscient or not; whether He has a care for man and watches over him or not; whether He has created man and the earth he inhabits or not—all these are questions which are simply insoluble; are matters which are, and must forever be, beyond the ken and apprehension of the human intellect.

A very slight examination will suffice to convince anyone that such a *via media* cannot exist; that, notwithstanding what its advocates may assert to the contrary, Agnosticism is but Atheism in disguise. More than this; it is worse than Atheism. An atheist, although he may deny the existence of God, is nevertheless open to discuss the subject. An agnostic, however, takes away all matter for discussion by insisting that God, if there be a God, is unknowable, and being so, is beyond and above the reach of reason and consciousness. Far from being the Creator of heaven and earth and all things, as faith teaches, God, according to the agnostic, is but a creature of the imagination, a figment of theologians, and religion, even in its pure and noblest form, is but a development of fetichism or ghost-worship.

Our present concern, however, is not so much with Agnosticism as a system of belief or unbelief, as with Agnosticism in relation to the theory of the origin and Evolution of the visible universe.

#### Origin of the Universe.

The great and perpetual crux for agnostics, as well as for atheists, is the existence of the world. For the theist, the origin of the material universe offers no difficulty. He accepts as true the declaration of Genesis, that: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," and with the acceptance of this truth, all difficulty, based on the fact of creation, vanishes forthwith. But to the agnostic, as well as to the atheist, the query: Whence the world and the myriad forms of life which it contains?—is constantly recurring, and with ever-increasing persistency and importance. It is, as all must acknowledge, a fundamental question, and no system of thought is worthy of the name of philosophy, that is not able to give an answer which the intellect will recognize as rational and conclusive.

According to Herbert Spencer, there are but "three verbally intelligent suppositions" respecting the origin of the universe. "We may," he says, "assert that it is self-existent; or that it is self-created; or that it is created by an external agency. That it should be self-existent is inconceivable, because this" implies the conception, which is an impossibility, of infinite past time. To this let us add, that even were self-existence conceivable, it would not in any sense be an explanation of the universe, nor make it in any degree more comprehensible. Thus the atheistic theory is not only absolutely unthinkable, but even if it were thinkable would not be a solution.