

AGNOSTICISM: A MODERN FORM OF GNOSIS ?

by ARTHUR MALTBY

MR. MALTBY, who is Tutor-Librarian at Kirkby College of Further Education, Liverpool, recently contributed an interesting paper on the Book of Ecclesiastes to our pages. When we consider the etymological significance of the term "agnostic" (coined by T. H. Huxley on the basis of the "Agnostos Theos" of the altar-inscription at Athens), it may be surprising to be told that a modern agnostic is really a kind of gnostic ; but Mr. Maltby gives reasons for maintaining that this is so.

THE conflict between science and religion, which raged in the second half of the nineteenth century, saw Thomas Henry Huxley coin the word "agnostic" as a title for the unbeliever that was more acceptable to him than the more dogmatic label of "atheist". An agnostic is, by definition, one who holds that nothing is known or is likely to be known about God and immortality and that our knowledge is necessarily restricted to material phenomena. The true agnostic should be one who claims a complete ignorance with regard to spiritual matters. Sir Leslie Stephen¹ defined agnostics as "All, then, who think that men should not be dogmatic about matters beyond the sphere of reason." Yet today the name is claimed by many definite unbelievers in the Western world as well as honest doubters and is often no more than a euphemism for the word which it was designed to replace. Sir Arnold Lunn² was surely right when he said, "the word agnostic should have been reserved not for those who reject the supernatural, but for any thinker, Christian or sceptic, who regards his solution to the great enigma as tentative and provisional rather than final. Similarly that useful word gnostic, had it not been cornered by an early heresy, should have been used to describe those who believe that they have hit on a 'gnosis' and who are confident that they have discovered the solution to the riddle of the universe". Far from assuming the sincere but humble rôle which their name suggests, most modern agnostics are eager to offer evidence against the

¹ L. Stephen, *An agnostic's apology* (1893).

² A. Lunn and J. B. S. Haldane, *Science and the supernatural: a correspondence* (1935).

existence of a personal God, against immortality, and against other vital tenets of Christian belief. The agnostic of today is not a neutral party in the debate between Christian and unbeliever. He is definitely on the side of the latter and will make many claims to knowledge on the topics discussed. In short, he is really an atheist, and his agnostic label is misleading. This is affirmed, to take one example, by Julian Huxley³ who tells us "A personal God . . . I know nothing of. What is more, I am not merely agnostic on the subject. . . . I disbelieve in a personal God". Another sceptic⁴ openly confesses: "Agnostics and atheists now usually mean the same thing". Agnostic is, however, now favoured because it implies a state of doubt resulting from integrity, rather than the positive denial suggested by the word atheist.

As the early Christians were thrown into argument with Gnostics who claimed a special *gnosis* above that which was vouchsafed to the average Christian, so modern Christians will be drawn into debate with the so-called agnostic. Yet, apart from the fact that it does not draw on revelation, agnosticism itself can be regarded as a *gnosis*, for to give an emphatic denial to all forms of spiritual truth surely suggests that one has some knowledge about God and the hereafter, even if this knowledge is of a purely negative kind. So we find that our opponents old and new, although by strict definition exact opposites, have some striking parallels from the Christian viewpoint such as are outlined below:

(1) *The nature of God.* The old Gnostic teachers generally held that the supreme God was extremely remote from mankind. Too remote, in fact, to reveal Himself to man and too remote to be reached by human prayer. The agnostic also tells us that the Deity cannot be discovered. The definition of the Divinity by the Gnostic Basilides as "the God who is not" is well in accord with the creed of the agnostic.

(2) *Matter.* It was the belief of the Gnostic sects that material things and God could never meet as matter was inherently evil. The modern agnostic also lays stress on the gulf between the material and the idea of the deity and consequently emphasizes the former, denying the validity of the latter. The approach to matter of gnostic and agnostic is very different, but from the Christian point of view the results are much the same. Neither party could accept the idea that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

³ J. S. Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (1957).

⁴ J. McCabe, *Rationalist Encyclopaedia* (1948), article on Agnosticism.

(3) *Alleged Christian naïveté.* A claim to intellectual superiority over orthodox Christians was made by the Gnostics. There is a remarkable parallel to this in the agnostic's attack on Christian doctrine and in the jibes that some of the agnostic school make at Christian belief—this despite the fact that their title suggests that they themselves have no knowledge to offer! Sir Leslie Stephen, an agnostic whom we have quoted as saying that men should not be dogmatic about things beyond the sphere of reason, had no hesitation in completely denying all spiritual evidence!

(4) *Morality.* Some Gnostics followed a strict moral code, but others made their *gnosis* an excuse for the overthrow of moral principles. In the demands made upon character, agnosticism is also lacking. Some of its adherents live good and unselfish lives which might be a credit to a Christian; others take advantage of the liberty which their creed permits whenever they can safely do so. Like the Gnostics, the creed of the Agnostic has no firm moral basis—each man is left to choose his own standard of behaviour as far as the law of the land permits.

(5) *Duality in Creation.* There is yet another parallel to be found here. Most Gnostic sects taught that the world was made by an inferior deity—the Demiurge, or Workman. Some agnostics of our time have tended to approach creation from what might be claimed to be a dualistic viewpoint, even approaching the personification of the principles which they acclaim. Thus Science has replaced God in their minds and Evolution is His Demiurge or creative power.

(6) *Ideas borrowed from Christianity.* Gnostic systems wove their own distinctive ideas around a Christian framework, using those parts of the Christian message which they admired and rejecting the rest. This is well seen in the life of Marcion. Many agnostics, too, combine Christian principles and some Christian teaching with their own beliefs in an attempt to reach a personal philosophy or try, as Julian Huxley does, to combine the best ideas from several faiths with scientific humanism to form a new synthetic religion.

(7) *Our greatest opponent.* There is no doubt that the Gnostics were the most dangerous foe that the early Christian Church faced. Likewise, with the word atheism out of favour, agnosticism is the Church's greatest opponent in Britain today. We were told in 1908 that "more recent philosophical developments encourage expectation that Agnosticism will soon be a superseded mode of thought",⁵

⁵ J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908).

but this has not proved to be the case. People who do not wish to face the challenge of Christianity and sincere disbelievers alike have seized upon the word agnostic as an honourable title.

Yet it has been the purpose of this article to point out two things. Firstly, that atheist and agnostic are synonymous titles as used today. Secondly, that the term agnostic is a misnomer with regard to the dogmatic opinions it is now made to represent. Writing of Julian Huxley, Bertrand Russell, J. B. S. Haldane and others, Lunn⁶ says "there is no satisfactory label for this school". We have tried to show that Gnostic would be just as satisfactory a label as Agnostic. Indeed, far from being opposites, the two groups have much in common. The title agnostic as used nowadays is false in the sense that it suggests a neutral position which the majority of people who take it certainly do not hold. It is a convenient shield from behind which confident and didactic assaults are made on Christianity by people who realize that the open acceptance of the label of atheist is impolitic. As hazy thinking and emotion-charged words often crop up in religious argument, it is as well to brush away misleading terminology and see our "agnostic" opponent for what he really is. He is almost always a definite unbeliever who, in his claims to a knowledge that overthrows Christian belief, may be regarded as a modern variant of the old Gnostic teachers.

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⁶ A. Lunn, *op. cit.*