

Agnosticism (part 2 of 4): Discussion on Huxley's Statement

Description: This article discusses the statement of Huxley on agnosticism.

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"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."^[1]

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 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. 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 (14th century), invention of the printing press (mid-15th century), and translation of the New Testament into the English and German languages (16th 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.

Endnotes:

[1] Meagher, Paul Kevin et al. Vol. 1, p. 77.

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