

AGNOSTICISM

By Mark Paynter

Agnosticism is a term used to describe “the view that we do not know either in principle or practice whether there is a God.”¹ Agnosticism holds that it is impossible for the human mind to answer the essential questions of life, namely is there a God and what is the nature of man. Agnosticism says it is impossible to know whether God exists or not. Atheism states categorically there is no God. T. H. Huxley in 1869 first used the term “agnosticism”. Huxley used the term to describe a position that was antithetical to the doctrine of the Gnostics, who proclaimed that it was possible to have secret knowledge that would lead to salvation.² To Huxley “agnosticism was more a method than a formal belief system”.³ In simple terms the word agnostic means without knowledge.

The agnostic position can be contrasted with several other positions. “The theist affirms God’s existence, the atheist denies it, while the agnostic prefers ignorance about it, the existence of God being an insolvable problem for him.”⁴

Today the term agnosticism is used in a wide number of ways. Agnosticism can refer to

- 1) The suspension of judgment on life’s ultimate issues.
- 2) The belief that God is irrelevant to life.
- 3) To express an overtly anti Christian or anticlerical position
- 4) “In a way that is roughly synonymous with atheism”⁵

Agnosticism routes go back way beyond 1869, Plato in *The Republic* praised Socrates as being wise because he was able to distinguish between that which he knew and that which he did not know. However philosophically the true founders of agnosticism can be considered to be David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Hume argued as we have seen that “one could know not the cause of anything”⁶ he therefore rejected the Biblical account of miracles. While Immanuel Kant believed “that we cannot have any knowledge of things that are not possible objects of experience. Kant argued that in particular “human knowledge is limited by the categories of time and space”⁷ Since God is not a possible object of our experience, we have no knowledge of Him based upon reason.”⁸ This is not to say that there is no God, but we are unable to know God. Immanuel Kant developed a theory that postulated that it is impossible “to know what reality is itself. This position

¹ Feinberg page 38

² Feinberg page 38 and Blanchard page 198

³ Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

⁴ Feinberg page 38

⁵ Feinberg page 38

⁶ Feinberg page 38

⁷ Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

⁸ Feinberg page 38

results in agnosticism; if we can't know reality, then we can't know truth.”⁹ Central to Kant's argument is the assertion that “the content of knowledge is determined by the mind.”¹⁰ Kant arrives at the conclusion that “there is an unbridgeable gap between our knowledge and reality.”¹¹

A number of factors gave rise to the emergence of the popularity of agnosticism towards the last part of the nineteenth century these included 1) it was believed that sense knowledge defined the limits of knowledge 2) natural theology was believed to have failed to such a large extent that there was a demand for religious matters to be examined in terms of evidence and standards. It was thought that religious beliefs could not meet the rigorous standards of the scientific method and the claims of the Bible seemed to be at odds with the then known knowledge of science. In 1862 evolutionary thinker Herbert Spencer observed that neither science nor religion could answer the essential questions of mankind. By the twentieth century agnosticism had come to be an embracing term for all forms of skepticism. A leading proponent of agnosticism has been popular Astronomer Carl Sagan.

Like skepticism, agnosticism ultimately turns into a self- defeating argument. To state that something is unknowable requires that we must know that it is unknowable.¹²

In order for the principles of agnosticism to be sustainable, the categories of the mind must correspond with reality, but this is the very thing agnosticism seeks to deny.¹³ Ultimately Kant's epistemology fails because it does not start with reality.¹⁴

As we have already seen in this essay many of the claims of agnosticism can be defeated through archaeological and other scientific advances over the last hundred years. We also know that the limits of knowledge are not reached by mere sense knowledge as can readily be observed in the splitting of the atom and the DNA code which required advances in technology that took man beyond the ability of normal unaided human senses.

It is interesting to note that the story of “Ben Hur” by Lewis Wallace was written in response to a debate that Wallace had with an agnostic concerning the deity of Christ.¹⁵ Both the movie and the book portray the deity of Christ vividly. “Ben Hur” which was produced in the same year, I was born remains my favorite movie of all time. I love the way it portrays the drama of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ.

⁹ McDowell page 634

¹⁰ McDowell page 635

¹¹ McDowell page 636

¹² McDowell page 637

¹³ McDowell page 638

¹⁴ McDowell page 639

¹⁵ Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).