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The Summer 1981 Free Inquiry contained the article "What is Agnosticism?" by H. J. Blackham. It dealt primarily with intimations of agnosticism among skeptical philosophers before 1869, when Thomas Henry Huxley invented the term as a label for his personal approach to religious and philosophical questions. This article will provide some history about agnosticism since 1869 and will suggest the reasons for the introduction of the term evangelical agnosticism. It will not deal with the relationship between the words agnosticism, skepticism, rationalism, and other related terms in the freethought tradition.

Huxley's account of his invention of the word agnostic was written in an essay entitled "Agnosticism" some twenty years after he coined the term. At this time he was sixty-four years old and his place in the Victorian establishment was very secure. He was an original and influential member of the London School Board, president of the Royal Society, and a trustee of the British Museum. Called "Darwin's Bulldog," Huxley was renowned for his spirited defense of many scientific ideas that were unpopular with the religious establishment. He wrote:

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain "gnosis,"—had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And, with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion. ... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of "agnostic." It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the "gnostic" of church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant. ... To my great satisfaction the term took; and when the Spectator had stood godfather to it, any suspicion in the minds of respectable people, that a knowledge of its parentage might have awakened was, of course, completely lulled.

Considerable controversy has arisen over when Huxley first used the term and whether he connected it with the gnostics, as indicated above, or with the "Unknown God" of Acts 17:23. In 1881, R. H. Hutton, for many years the editor of the Spectator, related it to the Unknown God. Apparently Huxley, in 1889, was trying to correct this with his recollection.

In any event, there seems little doubt that "agnostico" was first used in print in the January 29, 1870, issue of the Spectator. It contained an anonymous article, probably by R. H. Hutton, entitled "Pope Huxley." Huxley was called an "Agnostic" and an "evangelist" who was "labouring to preach to us all the gospel of suspense of judgment on all questions, intellectual and moral, on which we have not adequate data for a positive opinion."

The terms agnostic and agnosticism soon became popular, being used in a variety of ways by both advocates and detractors. Christopher Clausen, in his article "Agnosticism, Religion, and Science: Some Unexamined Implications," in the Spring 1978 Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature, notes: "The new term gave a name, and thereby a sort of respectability, to those who professed ignorance in metaphysical and religious matters.?"

In spite of its acceptance and the fact that he invented the term, Huxley rarely used it during the first twenty years of its existence. His lecture in 1870, "On Descartes 'Discourse Touching the Method of Using One's Reason Rightly and of Seeking Scientific Truth,' " does not contain either agnostic or agnosticism, although there were several natural points at which either could have been introduced. Neither "Administrative Nihilism," an 1871 lecture, nor "Mr. Darwin's Critics," published in November 1871, mentions agnosticism, although either might have been expected to do so. Huxley's lecture "Science and Culture" speaks of humanists several times, but agnostics are not mentioned. Even in Hume, written in 1878, Huxley used the term agnosticism only once and placed it in quotes to describe "that more modern way of thinking, which has been called 'agnosticism,' from its profession of an incapacity to discover the indispensable conditions of either positive or negative knowledge. ..." However, it is interesting to note that Huxley's 1894 Preface to Hume includes the identification of Socrates as "the first agnostic, the man who so far as the records of history go, was the first to see that clear knowledge of what one does not know is just as important as knowing what one does know."

In the fall of 1883, Charles A. Watts wrote to Huxley about a publication to be called The Agnostic Annual that Watts was planning. He asked three questions: "1. Is Agnosticism in accord with modern science? 2. What is its relation to popular theology?"
3. Is Agnosticism destined to supplant religious supernaturalism?"

Huxley responded, but apparently did not intend that his letter be published. When he received a copy of The Agnostic Annual from Watts, along with a second letter asking if he wished to make any changes for the second edition, Huxley answered immediately and with some annoyance at having been listed as a “contributor.” Five rapid letters with increasing acrimony passed between Watts and Huxley. In the end, Watts published Huxley’s original response in the second edition without Huxley’s permission. Huxley’s answers to the three questions appeared as the first set of answers in the second edition, followed by answers of varying length by G. M. McC., W. Stewart Ross (Saladin), P. A. Taylor, Charles Watts, F. W. Newman [younger brother of Cardinal Newman], Ignatius, W. B. McTaggart, Ernst Haeckel, W. Sadler (Baldr), James Beal, and Julian.

Whether or not Huxley was justified in his objection to being included in The Agnostic Annual, I do not know. It may be that his main objection was to the fact that Watts had apparently said in the first edition (I have not been able to find a copy) that Huxley “claimed to be the founder of Agnosticism,” whereas Huxley pointed out in his second letter to Watts that he, Huxley, had “invented the term ‘agnostic’—which is a somewhat different proposition.” In any event, the second edition reads, “Professor Huxley, who claims to be the inventor of the term Agnostic, . . .”

Huxley had apparently made his peace with The Agnostic Annual by 1892 because his article “Possibilities and Impossibilities” was included in that issue. By that time, Huxley’s essays on agnosticism had been published in the Nineteenth Century magazine under the titles “Agnosticism,” “Agnosticism: a Rejoinder,” and “Agnosticism and Christianity.” The articles, all written during 1889, provided apologetics, polemics, and occasionally irenics for the agnostic faith, as seen in the following paragraphs from “Agnosticism.”

If any one had preferred this request to me, [to draw up a negative creed] I should have replied that, if he referred to agnostics, they have no creed; and, by the nature of the case, cannot have any. Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. That principle is of great antiquity; it is as old as Socrates; as old as the writer who said, “Try all things, hold fast by that which is good;” it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him; it is the principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science. Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard for 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.

The results of the working out of the agnostic principle will vary according to individual knowledge and capacity, and according to the general condition of science. That which is unproven today may be proven by the help of new discoveries tomorrow. The only obligation accepted is to have the mind always open to conviction.

Huxley’s article “Agnosticism” appeared in February 1889. Two months later, Robert Ingersoll reacted to this article with one of his own, “Professor Huxley and Agnosticism,” in the North American Review. In his article Ingersoll generally agreed with Huxley, although he regretted that Huxley was “somewhat severe on the Positive Philosophy.” Ingersoll’s article is possibly his most systematic explanation of agnosticism from his point of view. Later in 1889 and in March 1890, Ingersoll published a two-part article, “Why Am I An Agnostic?” in the North American Review. However, he did not mention agnosticism per se in either part of this article. Six years later his famous lecture “Why Am I An Agnostic” was published, but again he did not use the term agnostic or agnosticism in the lecture itself. Even though he used these terms sparingly, Ingersoll became known in America as “the Great Agnostic.”

Ingersoll was asked about agnosticism in an interview given to the Philadelphia Times, September 25, 1885. The question was, “Don’t you think the belief of the Agnostic [regarding the existence of a Supreme Being] is more satisfactory to the believer than that of the Atheist?” Ingersoll replied, “There is no difference. The Agnostic is an Atheist. The Atheist is an Agnostic. The Agnostic says: ‘I do not know, but I do not believe there is a God.’ The Atheist says the same . . .”

This answer has not been accepted by most lexicographers, who usually see agnosticism as a third position regarding the God-idea, distinct from theism and atheism. Unfortunately, most dictionaries merely relate agnosticism to the idea of God and do not include the aspects of openmindedness and demand for evidence included in the Huxley definition. Most dictionaries say that the agnostic holds that the ultimate cause and essential nature of things are both unknowable. On the contrary, Huxley, in “Agnosticism and Christianity,” said, “I do not very much care to speak of anything as ‘unknowable.’ ”


The Agnostic Annual, founded by Charles A. Watts, continued to be published until 1908, when its title was changed to the Rationalist Press Association Annual, which in turn became the New Humanist. Articles like “An Agnostic View of Theism and Monism,” “Reverent Agnosticism,” “Scientific Religion,” “Agnosticism and Immortality,” “The Comfort of Agnosticism,” and “The Contest Between Agnosticism and Theology” abounded.

But enthusiasm for agnosticism faded. Exactly what happened to agnosticism on its way into the twentieth century is a story that still needs to be written. But the fact is that during the first decades of the twentieth century, overtly agnostic writings diminished rapidly. Most of what was being written was by those opposed to agnosticism. Few people seemed to be speaking out vigorously on behalf of the agnostic faith that Huxley had proposed.

Clarence Darrow did give two lectures, both entitled “Why I Am An Agnostic.” One was given at a symposium with a rabbi, a Protestant bishop, and a Catholic judge in Columbus, Ohio, on March 12, 1929. The other took place at Orchestra Hall, Chicago, in 1932. Both were good freethought lectures, but neither really described the principles of agnosticism. In the first lecture, Darrow said, “the word [agnostic] is generally applied to those who doubt the verity of accepted religious creeds or faiths. Everyone is an agnostic as to the beliefs or creeds they do not accept.” In the second lecture, he stated, “I am an agnostic. I see no purpose in the universe and neither can anyone who examines it from a scientific standpoint.” Unfortunately, neither lecture did much to further an understanding of agnosticism. There was little indication of the need for the patient, scientific attitude that had
been expressed by Huxley. Darrow, in contrast, showed himself to be a capable, militant iconoclast, following closely in the homiletic and theatrical tradition of his mentor, Robert Ingersoll.

In 1928, Darrow teamed up with Wallace Rice to prepare an anthology that was published in 1929 under the title *Infidels and Heretics: An Agnostic's Anthology*. The introduction included an excellent brief history and commentary on the word *agnostic*, and the anthology included more than one hundred entries in a broadly freethought context, but few of them were specifically about agnosticism.

Bertrand Russell's brief article written in 1949 and published in an E. Haldeman-Julius tract, "Am I An Atheist or an Agnostic? A Plea for Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas," is actually more about rationalism than agnosticism. When Russell actually discussed agnosticism, it was merely in relationship to the God-idea. A second E. Haldeman-Julius tract, published in 1950, also started with Russell's article. However, it included a rebuttal to the agnostic/atheist portion of Russell's essay that contended that the "Agnostic is necessarily an Atheist." Both Russell and his detractor were contributing to the idea that agnosticism has to do with the God-idea.

Russell's famous *Look* Magazine article, "What Is An Agnostic?" published November 3, 1953, helped rescue agnosticism from the obscurity into which it had fallen. The article, which was written in a question-and-answer format, has been reprinted in the subsequent editions of a book edited by Leo Rosten and published under various titles, most recently as *Religions in America*. It is probably the most readily available and widely read statement on the agnostic position.

Strangely, Rosten omitted the answer Russell sent to *Look* regarding the basic question, "What is an Agnostic?" *Look* itself had edited Russell's answer somewhat and used it as a heading to lead into the article: "An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. Or, if not impossible, at least impossible at the present." Russell's questions in the *Look* article included: "Are agnostics atheists?" "Since you deny 'God's law,' what authority do you accept as a guide to conduct?" "Does an agnostic do whatever he pleases?" "How does an agnostic regard the Bible?" "What is the meaning of life to the agnostic?" and "Do agnostics think that science and religion are impossible to reconcile?"

The brief highly distilled answers to these questions are respectively: "No ... [but] he is, for practical purposes, at one with the atheists." "An agnostic does not accept any 'authority' in the sense in which religious people do." "In one sense, no; in another sense, everyone does whatever he pleases." "An agnostic regards the Bible exactly as enlightening clerics regard it." "What is the meaning of 'the meaning of life'?"

Russell's full answer to the question about science and religion was:

The answer turns upon what is meant by "religion." If it means merely a system of ethics, it can be reconciled with science. If it means a system of dogma, regarded as unquestionably true, it is incompatible with the scientific spirit, which refuses to accept matters of fact without evidence, and holds that complete certainty is hardly ever attainable.

One would think that this article by Russell might have created more general interest in agnosticism than it apparently did. On the contrary, by 1959, the Encyclopaedia Britannica concluded its article on agnosticism by saying, "By the middle of the 20th Century the term agnosticism had practically ceased to be current as a label used by anyone to indicate either his creed or his method, though the adjective was still used to indicate a person's belief that we are ignorant on certain matters." The 1964 edition went on to say, "Because of the opprobrium attaching to it, the term agnosticism had lost favor by the second half of the 20th Century."

It was at about this time that "evangelical agnosticism" was inadvertently introduced. At first it was used jokingly to identify someone who was enthusiastic about agnosticism. Gradually it has come to be used to indicate an approach similar to Huxley's: emphasizing a ready willingness to accept the fact that we live without final assurance about those things that one does not endorse or reject. Only time will tell whether or not evangelical agnosticism will become as common a label as agnosticism was in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The principles of agnosticism can be—and frequently are—advocated without any reference to the word *agnostic*, for they are similar to the principles that govern free inquiry, humanism, rationalism, skepticism, and the scientific method.

Evangelical agnosticism is really nothing new. It is simply a reaffirmation of the principles enunciated by T. H. Huxley a century ago: It is wrong to say one is certain of the truth of any proposition unless one can produce satisfactory evidence. One's mind should always be open to conviction, and it is all right, after all, to confess one's ignorance about those things that one does not know.