

10/3/09

WHAT IS AGNOSTICISM ?

WITH OBSERVATIONS ON

HUXLEY, BRADLAUGH, AND INGERSOLL

AND A REPLY TO

GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE

ALSO A

DEFENCE OF ATHEISM.

BY

G. W. FOOTE.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

LONDON

THE FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY, LIMITED,
2 NEWCASTLE-STREET, FARRINGDON-STREET, E.C.

1902.

PRINTED BY
THE FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY, LTD.,
2 NEWCASTLE-STREET, FARRINGDON-STREET, LONDON, E.C.

B2510
N268

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

AGNOSTIC PRETENSIONS.

I HAPPENED to say once that an Agnostic was an Atheist with a tall hat on. Many a true word is spoken in jest, and I believe this is a case in point. It may be my obtuseness, but I have never been able to discover any real difference between the Atheist and the Agnostic, except that the latter is more in love with respectability; or, if not exactly in love, is anxious to contract a marriage of convenience. In the old Hall of Science days, I noticed that sturdy Freethinkers used to come and sit under Bradlaugh, and proudly call themselves Atheists. That was while they were comparatively poor, and free from domestic embarrassments. When they became better off, and their children (especially their daughters) grew taller, they gradually edged off to South-place Chapel, sat under Mr. Conway, and called themselves Agnostics. They did not pretend that their opinions had changed, and they were glad to sneak into the old place (minus wife and family) on a stirring occasion; but they had drifted, and they knew why, though they never liked to say so. Bradlaugh's strength lay amongst those who could, for one reason or another, afford to defy conventions; such as the skilled artisans and the lower-middle classes, with a dash of professional society. Two hundred a year was fatal to his front-seat people. When they reached that income they emigrated (with their womenkind) to a more "respectable" establishment.

I do not shrink from the consequences of the foregoing observations. Indeed, I will speak with the utmost plainness. Charles Bradlaugh was an Atheist because he was a man of invincible courage, and did not care twopence for the frowns of the Church or the sneers of Society. Professor Huxley was an Agnostic because he had over a thousand a year, and moved in the "upper circles," and filled certain "honorable" positions. He was too honest to say that he believed what he disbelieved, but he could not afford to bear an odious name. So he coined the word "Agnostic," which was newer, longer, and less intelligible than "Atheist." And having got a label that suited him entirely, he devised many subtle reasons why other Freethinkers should wear it too. A number of them jumped at the opportunity. They were delighted to be at once heterodox and respectable. It was a new and unexpected sensation. They were able to criticise orthodoxy with great freedom, providing they did not touch upon the two vital points of all supernatural faith—namely, the belief in God and the doctrine of a future life; and they were also able to chide the Atheist for his vulgar dogmatism in calling certain religious ideas false, when the true philosopher knew that it was impossible to demonstrate the negative of anything.

I used to think that Mr. Holyoake was an Atheist. At any rate, he wrote a *Trial of Theism*, in which he made that ancient faith look a frightful old impostor. But I conclude that he now wishes this work to be regarded as an academic exercise, a playful effort of the theoretical intelligence. Many years ago—and still for all I know—he offered the British public the story of his prosecution and imprisonment for "blasphemy" under the title of *The Last Trial for Atheism*. He was really not tried for Atheism at all, and most of us took the word as a defiant expression of his principles. But

we were mistaken. Mr. Holyoake explains in a recent publication that he is not an Atheist now, whatever he may have been when he was young, ignorant, and impulsive. He says that the Atheist is guilty of "preposterous presumption"—which I think I understand, although it is a very loose expression. He calls Atheism a "wild assumption." He professes himself an Agnostic; which, as he explains it, is our old friend Sceptic alive again from the pages of David Hume.

"Theism, Atheism, and Agnosticism denote attitudes of thought in relation to the existence of a Supreme Cause of Nature. The Theist declares, without misgiving, that there is such an existence. The Atheist, without misgiving, declares there is no such existence. The Agnostic, more modest in pretension, simply says that, having no information on the subject, he does not know."

Mr. Holyoake says, further on, that the Theist and the Atheist alike have "no doubt that they knew the solution" of the "mighty problem of the cause of eternity." Well, I beg to tell him that I am acquainted with at least one Atheist who does not affect to know this "solution." This particular Atheist does not so much as know the meaning of "the cause of eternity." To him it is—as Hamlet says—words, words, words! But this is not enough. I will go further, and ask Mr. Holyoake to refer me to *one* Atheist who *denies* the existence of God. Of course there are many Atheists who deny the existence of this or that God, because the definition of such alleged beings involves a contradiction to obvious facts of universal experience. But what Atheist denies the existence of *any* God; that is to say, of any superhuman or supermundane power? All the Atheists I know of take the position that there is no evidence on which to form a valid judgment, and that man's finite intellect seems

incapable of solving an infinite problem. And as I understand Mr. Holyoake this is the very position taken by the Agnostic.

Etymologically, as well as philosophically, an Atheist is one without God. That is all the "A" before "Theist" really means. Now I believe the Agnostic is without God too. Practically, at any rate, he is in the same boat with the Atheist.

Atheism may be called a negative attitude. No doubt it is so. But every negative involves something positive. If the Atheist turns away from the "mighty problem" as hopeless, he is likely to tackle more promising problems with greater vigor and effect. But it is admitted by Mr. Holyoake that Agnosticism is a negative attitude too. Wherein, then, lies the justification for all the super-fine airs of its advocates?

When you look into the matter closely, you perceive that Atheism and Agnosticism are both definite in the same direction. Bradlaugh and Huxley were at one in their hostile criticism of Christianity. Keeping the mind free from superstition is an excellent work. It is weeding the ground. But it is not sowing, and still less reaping. It merely creates the possibility of sound and useful growth. We have to fall back upon Secularism at the finish. Nor is that a finality. Secularism is the affirmation of the claims of this life against the usurpations of the next. But the affirmation would be unnecessary if the belief in a future life disappeared or radically changed. Secularism itself—whatever Mr. Holyoake may say—is an attitude. The face that was turned from God is turned towards Man. What will follow is beyond the range of Atheism or Agnosticism. Presently it is beyond the range of Secularism. It is not to be determined by any system. It depends on positive knowledge and the laws of evolution.

AGNOSTICISM AND ORTHODOXY.

During the most vigorous part of his life Mr. Holyoake passed as an Atheist, but in his old age he prefers to call himself an Agnostic. Now this is a change that might be allowed to pass unchallenged, if it were not made the occasion of an attack on others who elect to remain under the old flag. Old age is entitled to comforts, or at least to shelter from hardships; and if a veteran of over eighty finds any advantage or convenience in adopting a more tolerable designation, without any actual renunciation of principle, it is only a curmudgeon that would deny him the luxury. But when we are practically asked to share it with him we have the right to make an open refusal. When the fox, in the old story, lost his tail, and then tried to persuade his brethren that they would look much handsomer if they dispensed with theirs, it was time to tell him that the appendages were both ornamental and useful. If "Atheist" is in Mr. Holyoake's way, by all means let him get rid of it. But when he advances a reason why others should follow his example, it is permissible to tell him that his reason is insufficient. Mr. Holyoake's reason is this—in brief. Theism says there is a God, Atheism says there is no God, and Agnosticism says it does not know. Agnosticism, therefore, is modest and accurate; it does not dogmatise, and it keeps within the limit of its information. Such is Mr. Holyoake's argument, and his conclusion would be sound enough if his premises were not faulty. But they *are* faulty. Mr. Holyoake declared that Atheists, like Theists, had "no doubt that they knew the solution" of the "mighty problem of the cause of eternity." "Well," I said in reply, "I beg to tell him that I am acquainted with at least one Atheist who does not affect to know this 'solution.' To him it

is—as Hamlet says—words, words, words! I will go further,” I added, “and ask Mr. Holyoake to refer me to *one* Atheist who *denies* the existence of God.” He has not, however, deigned to reply to this perfectly legitimate question.

Atheists may, just like Agnostics, deny the existence of this or that God. It all depends on definitions. A quarter of a century ago, in criticising a book by Professor Flint, I wrote as follows:—

“There be Gods many and Lords many; which of the long theological list is to be selected as *the* God? A God, like everything else from the heights to the depths, can be known only by his attributes; and what the Atheist does is not to argue against the existence of *any* God, which would be sheer lunacy, but to take the attributes affirmed by Theism as composing its Deity, and to inquire whether they are compatible with each other and with the facts of life. Finding that they are not, the Atheist simply sets Theism aside as not proven, and goes on his way without further afflicting himself with such abstruse questions.”

This is precisely the position I took in replying to Mr. Holyoake recently, and it is the position of all the Atheists I know or have ever known. Moreover, it was, as far as I understood him, the position of Mr. Holyoake himself while we all thought him an Atheist. During his debate with Mr. Bradlaugh, some thirty years ago, it was admitted that both were Atheists; the question in dispute was whether Atheism was involved in Secularism. I do not recollect that there was so much as a suggestion that a difference existed between them as to the meaning of Atheism. Their difference was over the meaning of Secularism.

I am well aware that persons of a metaphysical turn of mind, and a good knowledge of the dictionary, can argue with each other on all sorts of subjects, and keep

it up till death or the day of judgment. But the trouble comes when they have to meet the practical man, the average man, the man in the street. He has his living to get, and lots of things to attend to; so, instead of beating about the bush, he goes straight to what seems to him to be the kernel of the question—the real point at issue. He may be mistaken, of course; but that is his method, and you will never wean him from it. All the “revelations” in the world have been got up for him. It was found that no impression was made upon him by Platonic or other long-winded ratiocinations; so speculation was presented to him as fact, and fancy as history; and in that way he was nobbled, because he did not perceive the cheating—though he is beginning to see it now. Well then, let an Atheist and an Agnostic stand together before this gentleman; and what difference will he discover between them? “Have you got a God?” he asks in his blunt way. The Atheist plainly answers “No.” The Agnostic hums and ha’s. “Come now, straight,” says the questioner, “have you got a God?” The Agnostic says: “Well, I —.” “Here, that’ll do,” says the man in the street, “I see you haven’t got one. You’re just like the other fellow, only he’s straighter.” And really that practical man, that average man, that man in the street, is right. He has got hold of the substance. All else is shadow. You have a God, or you have not. There is really no intermediate position. If you have a God, you are a Theist; if you have no God, you are an Atheist. Let your reasons be few or many, plain or subtle, this is what it comes to at the finish. “I am the Lord thy God,” cries some Deity or other through the mouth of a priest. “Not mine,” says the Atheist. “Not precisely mine,” says the Agnostic, “at least at present; these things require a great deal of consideration; but I promise to keep an open mind.” Now if the offended Deity were to box

the ears of one of them, which do you thin it would be? I fancy it would be the Agnostic, for all his "reverence."

Mr. Holyoake's new attitude is likely to procure him fresh friends in the fold of faith—which he will probably not find annoying. One announced himself in the *Church Gazette*, and this is what he said:—

"One is glad to see that Mr. Holyoake has renounced the title of 'Atheist' in favor of that of 'Agnostic.' The *Freethinker* deprecates his doing so on the ground that the two terms imply exactly the same thing. We cannot admit that they do. An 'Atheist' properly means a person who positively denies the existence of a God, while an 'Agnostic' is simply one who does not know, but who very often is strongly inclined to believe in a Deity. Between these attitudes there lies a vast interval. The first is as dogmatic as that of a Cardinal; the second is philosophical, and of one who adopts it there is always a good deal of hope."

Without inquiring what right a Christian paper has to define "Atheism" for Atheists, I may observe how consoling it must be to Mr. Holyoake to be told by a Christian that he is "philosophical," that there is "a vast interval" between himself and a wicked, dogmatic Atheist, and that there is "a good deal of hope" for him! My own criticism is nothing to this. This orthodox editor greets Mr. Holyoake's one leg over the fence, and "hopes" for his whole body. Other orthodox editors in the course of time, either before his death or after, will perhaps argue that Mr. Holyoake really saw the error of his ways and probably "found salvation."

MR. HOLYOAKE'S VINDICATION.

Mr. Holyoake's article on "Agnosticism Higher than Atheism" in my own journal, the *Free-thinker*, for January 6 (1901) opened with a warm defence of his own consistency.

Personally, I may say that I do not care two pins, or even one, whether Mr. Holyoake has or has not made or undergone a change in his opinion, his attitude, or whatever he or anyone else may please to call it. He seems to be quite passionate about it, but it is really of no importance to anyone but himself. The only important question is whether he is right in what he says now. All men but the fossilised have changed intellectually, as they have changed physically. "In a higher world," said Newman, "it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Emerson stated the same truth with scornful relation to human vanity. "A foolish consistency," he said, "is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." It may be telling in political debate, where there is ever a hundred grains of nonsense to one grain of sense, to reply to an opponent out of his own mouth, and show that what he says to-day is answered by what he said several years ago. Vain politicians fall into this trap, because they fancy their own consistency is something of infinite moment; not their consistency of principle or intention, but their consistency of mental conclusion. But now and then a stronger politician laughs at the trap which is laid for him. Some persons thought it was mere cynicism on Beaconsfield's part when he declined to argue a question before parliament in the light of certain "musty old speeches" of his, which had been quoted against him in the debate. But

it was sanity and wisdom. It was a personal question whether he was right or wrong twenty years before; it was a public question whether he was right or wrong at that moment.

Mr. Holyoake, as I understand him, says he never was an Atheist. He has always an Agnostic, but he lacked the word to express his attitude. The term he did suggest was Cosmism as a substitute for Atheism. In connection with it he quotes the words—from Thomas Cooper, I believe—"I do not say there is no God, but this I say—I know not." Perhaps it will surprise him to learn—or to be reminded of it if he has forgotten it—that Charles Bradlaugh, both in print and on the platform, was fond of quoting those very words as indicating the essential attitude of Atheism. Are we to conclude, then, that Bradlaugh, too, was an Agnostic without knowing it? Are we also to conclude that not a single Atheist during the past forty years understood Atheism, and that the only person who did understand it was Mr. Holyoake, who was never an Atheist at all?

"Agnosticism," Mr. Holyoake says, "relates only to Deity." Does it indeed? Its meaning and application were not thus restricted by Professor Huxley. This is what he said in his essay on "Agnosticism" (*Collected Essays*, vol. v., p. 245):—

"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 great 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 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."

This is stated even more compendiously in a later essay on "Agnosticism and Christianity" (vol. v., p. 310):—

"Agnosticism is not properly described as a 'negative' creed, nor indeed as a creed of any kind, except in so far as it expresses absolute faith in the validity of a principle, which is as much ethical as intellectual. This principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. This is what Agnosticism asserts; and, in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism."

These are, I believe, the only two *definitions* of Agnosticism to be found in Huxley's writings; and, so far from restricting the application of the term to the question of the existence of Deity, as Mr. Holyoake says it should be, its inventor does not so much as allude to that question in either of these passages. He presents Agnosticism as a general method or attitude in relation to all propositions, and therefore to all subjects whatsoever.

Mr. Holyoake goes on to say that Agnosticism—*his* Agnosticism—"leaves a man to reason, to conscience, to morality, to nature, to the laws of truth, of honor, and the laws of the State." Yes, and it also leaves him, if he prefers, to the opposite of these—to folly, vice, and crime, to the workhouse, the lunatic asylum, and the prison. What Mr. Holyoake says of Agnosticism is simply an echo of what Bacon said of Atheism. "Atheism," that philosopher said, in the *Essay Of Superstition*, "leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation."

When Bacon wanted to dig the Atheist in the fifth rib with a dirty dagger, he treated Atheism as a denial of God. "None," he said, "deny there is a God but those for whom it maketh that there were no God." Which is equivalent to saying that no one denies God but a scoundrel. But when he talks like a candid philosopher his language is very different. "It were better," he declared, "to have no opinion of God at all, than such an opinion as is unworthy of him." That was the real difference between Atheism and superstition. "No opinion of God at all." Bacon regarded that as philosophical Atheism. Mr. Holyoake regards it as philosophical Agnosticism. Well, this is a free country, at least to that extent, and I prefer to side with Bacon.

It seems to me that Mr. Holyoake's philosophy of "disbelief" and "non-belief" is a sad confusion, abounding in arbitrary statements. Take the following passage, for instance:—

"'Disbelief' is the state of mind of one who has evidence before him, but finds it so insufficient that he disbelieves the proposition to which the evidence relates. 'Non-belief' expresses that state of mind where all relevant evidence is absent, and he is therefore in a state of non-belief or absolute unknowingness."

Now the first sentence is but a pretty waste of words. Repetition is not definition. It enlightens no one to say that "disbelief" is the state of mind of a person who "disbelieves." Nor is it true that one who disbelieves has always evidence before him. He may have none at all. I disbelieve in the existence of dragons and centaurs, but I am not aware that there is a scrap of positive evidence on the subject. On the other hand, there may be "relevant evidence"—can there be any *irrelevant* evidence?—in the case of "non-belief," which is precisely the same thing as unbelief. My own position

with regard to the "microbe theory" of disease is one of "non-belief," but I should be very ignorant or foolish to say that "relevant evidence" was totally "absent." And how on earth can "absolute unknowingness" have any relation to belief at all? It is simply a blank. Nothing is there, and no room exists for any form of opinion.

Mr. Holyoake's "non-belief" seems to be a nonentity. The remaining term is "disbelief." This he does not really define, but he evidently means it to connote a state of mind following the recognition that the evidence advanced in favor of a proposition is "insufficient." Now I venture to say that this is *unbelief* or *disbelief* simply according to the balance of the evidence. Mr. Holyoake speaks as though evidence were always *for* and never *against*, whereas it is usually of both kinds. If the evidence is unsatisfactory, we say we do not believe the proposition. If the evidence is *very* unsatisfactory, we say we disbelieve it. The two words express different degrees of the same general state of mind.

This view has the countenance of common usage, as it certainly has the countenance of etymology. And a very remarkable fact may be cited in this connection. The orthodox term for all sceptics, from the mild Unitarian to the terrible Atheist, is "unbelievers."

Mr. Holyoake goes to the length of saying that "To disbelieve is to deny." I say it is not. Mr. Holyoake himself disbelieves the theory of a future life, but he does not deny it. Denial, in the strict sense of the word, presupposes knowledge. It is not a mere question of opinion—like belief, unbelief, or disbelief. If you say I have done a certain thing which I know I have not done; if you say I was at a certain place yesterday when I know I was not there; I deny your assertion. But if you say that a friend of mine has done a certain

thing, or was at a certain place yesterday, when I was not there myself, I cannot deny your assertion. Yet I may not believe it from what I know of my friend's character and movements, and I may disbelieve it when I have heard the evidence on both sides.

It seems to me that Mr. Holyoake made this arbitrary affirmation about disbelief and denial because it served the turn in his argument against Atheism. He proceeds to say—and with plausibility if his theory of disbelief is accurate—that if you “take denial out of the word” Atheism you “take the soul out of it.” “Atheism,” he repeats, “which does not deny God is a corpse.” All this, however, is repetition on repetition of what he is asked to prove. The idea seems to be that saying a thing over again, with fresh force and point, is a good substitute for “relevant evidence.”

Mr. Holyoake says there are “brave spirits” in the Atheistic camp “who believe that the existence of God can be disproved, and say so.” “To them,” he adds, “Atheism, in its old sense—of denial—is the only honest word.” Of course it is. But who *are* these Atheists? Why does not Mr. Holyoake give us a little information? What is the use of argument without facts? I admit there are Atheists who believe that the reality of some conceptions of God can be disproved. If reason is to be trusted—and we have no other guide—it is perfectly clear that a God of infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness, does not exist. John Stuart Mill was as firm as a rock on this point, and he was the author of a classical treatise on Logic. Mr. Holyoake himself, I believe, would not deny that Science has practically disproved the existence of the God of Miracles.

It seems to me that Mr. Holyoake plays with the word “God.” He treats it as a definite word, with one invariable meaning. But it means anything or nothing,

according to definitions. Without a definition, you might as well pronounce it backwards. It may be true that the Atheist "denies the existence of God," if you define God to mean Thor, Jupiter, Jehovah, or Christ. But is it true that the Atheist denies the existence of any possible God? This is a point to which Mr. Holyoake does not address himself. Nor is he likely to do so while he uses the word "God" as loosely as any shuffling theologian.

Some conceptions of God are flatly contradicted by the most familiar facts of experience. These are as much to be denied as a round square or a bitter sweet. Some conceptions of God are not contradicted by any facts of experience. They may be true, and they may be false. In the absence of "relevant evidence," there is no way of deciding. It is all a matter of conjecture. And both information and denial, in such cases, are mere expressions of personal preference.

But behind all the metaphysics of this subject there is a Science of which one could hardly surmise from his writings that Mr. Holyoake had ever heard. I mean the Science whith the great David Hume inaugurated in his *Natural History of Religion*. Not to go beyond our own country, the researches of Spencer, Lubbock, Tylor, Frazer, Harland, and other workers in this fruitful field, have thrown a flood of light upon the genesis and development of religious belief. The facts are seen, and they tell their own tale. And when it is once perceived that the "highest" ideas of modern theology have their roots in the lowest savage superstitions, the old disputes about the existence of God seem almost fantastic.

This is a point, however, which it is not my object to press. Some of my readers will understand; others, perhaps, will take the hint. I wish to conclude this criticism by showing that what Mr. Holyoake means by

Agnosticism, is what Atheists have always meant by Atheism.

The shortest way is the best. Let us take the most conspicuous, the most hated, English Atheist of the nineteenth century ; one who was supposed—and especially by those who knew least about him—to be as extravagant in his speech as he was shocking in his character. I refer to Charles Bradlaugh. He was an Atheist of Atheists, and this is what he wrote :—

“The Atheist does not say ‘there is no God,’ but he says, ‘I know not what you mean by God; I am without idea of God; the word “God” is, to me, a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny God, because I cannot deny that of which I have no conception, and the conception of which, by its affirmer, is so imperfect that he is unable to define it to me.’”

Now let us hear the Agnostic. Mr. Holyoake says :—

“The Agnostic assertion of unknowingness is far wider, far more defiant and impregnable than the denial of the Atheist who stands upon the defective evidence. Agnosticism is a challenge. It says: ‘I do not know; do you? Your assertions have no force. Evidence from the field of facts is wanted’.....the very idea of an originating Deity has no place in the understanding.”

Mr. Bradlaugh’s language is that of clear thought. Is Mr. Holyoake’s so? It is hard to see how an assertion of ignorance can be “defiant,” though it may be “impregnable” because there is nothing to attack. If the Atheist stands upon the defective evidence, what else is the Agnostic doing when he says that evidence is wanted? And is not the last sentence on all-fours with Mr. Bradlaugh’s last sentence? What difference there is seems in favor of the Atheist. It is one of carefulness and modesty. Mr. Bradlaugh speaks for himself. Mr. Holyoake speaks for everybody.

What substantial difference, I ask, can anyone find between these two quotations? Mr. Bradlaugh was as much an Agnostic as Mr. Holyoake, and Mr. Holyoake is as much an Atheist as Mr. Bradlaugh. It is therefore evident, as far as this particular discussion goes, that Agnosticism is a new name for the old Atheism.

After repeating that Agnosticism "asserts that the existence of God is a proposition of utter unknowingness," Mr. Holyoake declares that it "leaves Theism stranded on the shores of speculation." What more has been asserted by any Atheist? Does it not prove that the Agnostic is "without God in the world"? And does not this illuminating phrase of the great Apostle show the real parting of the ways?

INGERSOLL'S AGNOSTICISM.

MR. HOLYOAKE, I believe, has a great admiration for the late Colonel Ingersoll. I have a great admiration for him too. He was a splendid man, a magnificent orator, and a deep thinker. This last fact is too little recognised. Many take the clear for the shallow and the turbid for the profound. Others love decorum even though it drops into dulness. Ingersoll's brightness, no less than his lucidity, was detrimental to his reputation. It is commonly thought that the witty man cannot be wise. But a minority know how false this is. Shakespeare was the wittiest as well as the wisest of men.

Be that as it may, the point is that Mr. Holyoake and I both admire Ingersoll. We may therefore appeal to him on this question of Atheism and Agnosticism. Not that he is to decide it for us, but it will be profitable to hear what he has to say.

Ingersoll published a lecture entitled *Why Am I An Agnostic?* This was during his mellow maturity,

when some hasty persons said he was growing too "respectable." He was perfectly frank, however, and even aggressive, on the question of the existence of Deity. Here is a passage from the very first page of this lecture :—

"Most people, after arriving at the conclusion that Jehovah is not God, that the Bible is not an inspired book, and that the Christian religion, like other religions, is the creation of man, usually say: 'There must be a Supreme Being, but Jehovah is not his name, and the Bible is not his word. There must be somewhere an over-ruling Providence or Power.'

"This position is just as untenable as the other. He who cannot harmonise the cruelties of the Bible with the goodness of Jehovah, cannot harmonise the cruelties of Nature with the goodness and wisdom of a supposed Deity."

After giving several illustrations of the Deist's difficulty, Ingersoll proceeds as follows, introducing for the first time the word Agnostic :—

"It seems to me that the man who knows the limitations of the mind, who gives the proper value to human testimony, is necessarily an Agnostic. He gives up the hope of ascertaining first or final causes, of comprehending the supernatural, or conceiving of an infinite personality. From out the words Creator, Preserver, and Providence, all meaning falls."

Mr. Holyoake might reply that he endorses every word of this paragraph; but I should have to tell him that there are much stronger things to come. My point for the present is that Ingersoll in a lecture on Agnosticism makes it look remarkably like Atheism. Certainly he dismisses the only idea of God that a Theist would ever think of contending for.

Let us now turn to the last address that Ingersoll ever delivered, before the American Free Religious Association at Boston, on June 2, 1899, only a few weeks prior

to his sudden death. This lecture is published under the title of *What is Religion?* Curiously it sums up all that he had ever taught on the subject. There is an autumn ripeness about it, and its conclusion has the air of a final deliverance in sight of the grave. Nor is this astonishing; for he knew the nature of his malady, and was aware that death might overtake him at any moment. It should be added that Ingersoll *read* this address, which was printed from his manuscript.

Now this lecture on *What is Religion?* contains a careful and elaborate statement of the speaker's Materialism. It runs as follows:—

“If we have a theory we must have facts for the foundation. We must have corner-stones. We must not build on guesses, fancies, analogies, or inferences. The structure must have a basement. If we build, we must begin at the bottom.

“I have a theory, and I have four corner-stones.

“The first stone is that matter—substance—cannot be destroyed, cannot be annihilated.

“The second stone is that force cannot be destroyed, cannot be annihilated.

“The third stone is that matter and force cannot exist apart—no matter without force; no force without matter.

“The fourth stone is that that which cannot be destroyed could not have been created; that the indestructible is the uncreateable.

“If these corner-stones are facts, it follows as a necessity that matter and force are from and to eternity; that they can neither be increased nor diminished.

“It follows that nothing has been, or can be, created; that there never has been, or can be, a creator.

“It follows that there could not have been any intelligence, any design, back of matter and force.

“There is no intelligence without force. There is no force without matter. Consequently there could not by

any possibility have been any intelligence, any force, back of matter.

"It therefore follows that the supernatural does not, and cannot, exist. If these four corner-stones are facts, nature has no master. If matter and force are from and to eternity, it follows as a necessity that no God exists."

Here is an argumentative denial of the existence of God, as the term is generally understood. It is true that Ingersoll says, a little later on, that he does not pretend to *know*, but only states what he *thinks*. This qualification, however, while it is a sign of modesty, is not necessary from a philosophical point of view, since no man who is not *inspired* can possibly advance anything on this subject but his opinions. This is so from the very nature of the case, for there is no certainty about the strongest argument in the world unless its conclusion can be submitted to the test of verification.

According to Mr. Holyoake's criterion, therefore, Ingersoll had no right to call himself an Agnostic. He was not merely a doubter, but a denier, and should have called himself an Atheist. Not that he denied any possible God, for no Atheist does that. He denied the God of Christianity and the God of ordinary Theism.

Now if Ingersoll's statement of the Agnostic position, thus qualified and understood, is one which Agnostics in general are ready to endorse, it is perfectly clear that the only difference between Agnosticism and Atheism is one of nomenclature.

There is evidence that this was Ingersoll's own opinion. The complete "Dresden" edition of his works contains an important "Interview" headed "My Belief" (vol. v., pp. 245-248). It is in the form of Question and Answer. We will take the following:—

Question.—Do you believe in the existence of a Supreme Being?

Answer.—I do not believe in any Supreme personality or in any Supreme Being who made the universe and governs nature. I do not say there is no such Being—all I say is that I do not believe that such a Being exists.

This is precisely the position taken by all the Atheists I ever knew. If this is Agnosticism, every Atheist is an Agnostic, and every Agnostic is an Atheist.

Let it not be said that this is only my inference. It was Ingersoll's own view, as is shown by the following extract:—

Question. Don't you think that the belief of the Agnostic is more satisfactory to the believer than that of the Atheist?

Answer. 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 any God." The Atheist says the same. The orthodox Christian says he knows there is a God; but we know that he does not know. He simply believes. He cannot know. The Atheist cannot know that God does not exist.

I have given the whole of this Question and Answer to avoid any possible misunderstanding. The pertinent and decisive words are in the first half of the Answer. Ingersoll is not *with* Mr. Holyoake, but *against* him. We have only to reverse the order of three short sentences to feel the full force of his conclusion. *The Atheist is an Agnostic. The Agnostic is an Atheist. There is no difference.*

WICKED OPINIONS.

MR. HOLYOAKE seems to be turning his back upon a principle which he has often expounded; a principle which in the justification of Freethought, and without which persecution is honest jurisprudence. He refers very strangely to certain "Atheists whose disbelief in born of dissoluteness, and who conceal vice by theological outrage of speech." This is followed by a scornful reference to "pot-house Atheism."

I am not well acquainted with pot-houses, but I should imagine that Atheism is not prevalent in them. I have seen the pot-house people at large on certain holidays, but I never noticed much Atheism in their conversation. Vulgar, malignant Christians, of course, have often suggested that Atheists hold their meetings in public-houses; but I hope Mr. Holyoake does not wish to countenance this calumny.

I should imagine, too, that if a man wanted to "conceal" his "vice" he would be a very great fool to resort to "theological outrage of speech." It would pay him better, or rather less badly, to be outrageous in any other direction. This is precisely the way to excite odium, to attract hostile regard, and make himself an object of general suspicion. That a vicious man should wear a mask of piety is sufficiently intelligible. Myriads have done it, and many still do it, as we learn every now and then by the police news. But for a vicious man to range himself on the side of an odious and hated minority, to affront the prejudices of the very people he wishes to impose upon, and thus to invite a scrutiny where he desires to practice concealment, would be an amazing display of imbecility.

But it is still worse to hear Mr. Holyoake stigmatising the "disbelief" of certain Atheists—not their affecta-

tions or pretensions, but their *disbelief*—as “born of dissoluteness.” If this has any meaning at all, it implies that belief is amenable to volition. If it be so, you can change a man’s belief by punishing him; that is, by giving him a strong inducement to believe otherwise; and, in that case, the Christians were quite right when they fined, imprisoned, tortured, and burnt heretics as guilty of moral perversity. Such offenders *could* believe the orthodox faith, but they *would* not, and force was employed to overcome their obstinacy. But the truth is, that men do not think as they would, but as they can; that is to say, as they must. The intellect may be affected by the emotions, but not directly. The wish is sometimes father to the thought, but it must necessarily be a case of unconscious paternity. We may be blinded by passion, but when the mist disperses the mind’s eye sees the facts according to its capacity and the laws of mental optics. I do not merely “disbelieve,” I “deny” that Atheism ever was, ever is, or ever could be, born of dissoluteness. “The fool,” according to the Psalmist, “hath said in his heart, there is no God.” Mr. Holyoake substitutes *sinner* for *fool*, and thinks he is philosophic. I think that he and the Psalmist are in the same boat.

Let us take an illustration. A burglar is going to break into a jeweller’s shop, but he sees a policeman looking at him from the opposite corner. He wishes to crack that crib, he came out to crack that crib, he is there to crack that crib. Why should he not do it? There is a policeman over the way. What of that? Can he not *wish* the policeman were not there? Can he not *believe* the policeman is not there? We know he cannot. We know the shop is safe for the present.

Now the God that Mr. Holyoake refers to in this connection is the heavenly policeman. A vicious man wishes this God were not looking on, then he believes this God

is not looking on, and thus he becomes a full-blown Atheist! Could there be a greater absurdity?

It should be recognised that the human intellect acts (or functions) according to necessary laws. Given certain information, and a certain power of judgment, and a man's conclusion follows with mathematical precision. His desires, and hopes, and fears have nothing to do with the matter. They do not govern his opinions. His opinions govern them. Our ideas do not accommodate themselves to our emotions: our emotions accommodate themselves to our ideas. Love itself, which is supposed to be absolutely blind, walks with some degree of rationality in the light. Peasants do not fall in love with a princess. Why? Because they know she is beyond their reach.

Actions may be wicked, and intentions may be wicked. But there cannot be a wicked opinion. An opinion has only one quality; it is true or false—or, to be still more strict, it is accurate or inaccurate. The quantity of accuracy and inaccuracy may vary, but the quality is unchangeable.

An opinion may always be reduced to a proposition. Now if you apply the word "wicked" to a proposition you will immediately see its grotesqueness.

It is true that a man may neglect to inform himself on a subject, either through indolence or wilfulness; and his opinion will suffer in consequence. He may even be dishonest, if inquiry devolved upon him as a duty. But his *opinion* cannot be dishonest. You might say it was born of dishonesty, but that is a very forced metaphor, and not the language of philosophy. An opinion is always born of two parents; a man's natural faculty of judgment and the information on which it operates.

If there cannot be a dishonest opinion, of course there cannot be an honest opinion. It is nonsense to talk of

a man's "honest belief" unless you simply mean that the belief he expresses is the belief he entertains. Strictly speaking, the honesty is not in the belief, but in the man. He may believe what he says or he may not; in either case his belief is his belief. He knows it, if you do not.

Mr. Holyoake, if I recollect aright, has championed the cause of "honest disbelief" in his former writings. The expression was unfortunate, because it was unphilosophical; but I always understood him to mean that the sceptic had the same right to his thought as a believer. So far I agree with him. In any other sense of the words I profoundly differ. And I deeply regret that Mr. Holyoake has given the sanction of his name to a view of the formation of opinions which is calculated to serve the cause of bigotry, if not of active persecution. I fear that the sentence I have specially criticised will be quoted against Atheists *ad nauseam*, and will be a fresh stumbling-block in the path of Free-thought advocacy.

BLANK ATHEISM.

MORE than twenty years ago I was personally acquainted with the late Mathilde Blind. James Thomson ("B.V."), the author of that sombre and powerful poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*, was with me on more than one occasion in her rooms, which were then the centre of some distinguished intellectual society. Swinburne used to call there occasionally, though it was never my luck to meet him. Professor Clifford was another visitor, and with him I came into fairly close contact. One evening I had a little party, consisting of Miss Blind and a few of her friends, at my own bachelor diggings, where by request I read them Thomson's masterpiece.

It was not then published, in the ordinary sense of the word. I had it as it appeared in the *National Reformer*—a presentation copy from Thomson himself, with the omitted stanza added in his own handwriting. It had been a good deal talked about in select circles, and the members of that little party were very glad to make its complete acquaintance in that fashion. When the flood-gates of criticism were open, one young poet suggested some rather fatuous improvements. All admired the work very much, or said they did; but I noticed that they all regarded it as a literary curiosity, a striking poetical *tour de force*, and not at all as the life-agony of a man of genius minted into golden verse by his unsubduable art. That aspect of the case did not seem to strike them a bit, and I felt considerably disappointed at their *dilettante* observations.

But why do I go back to that long-ago? Why open and deliberately shut doors of old memories? Why let the daylight of recollection into ancient disused chambers, where the only footfalls are ghostly, and even these are deadened by the dust of many years? Because I cannot help it. Because a sentence in a book, casually meeting my gaze, has done it in my despite.

“What took this soul of mine on the verge of a blank Atheism, of utter denial and despair; what took it and led it out of itself to the calm and awful centre of things?”

This was the sentence that arrested my attention in the “Memoir” which Dr. Garnett contributes to the new edition of Mathilde Blind’s *Poetical Works*. The sentence is hers. And having raised the question, she supplies the answer.

“It was Buckle. I verily think I owe to him what I owe to no other human being—an eternal debt of gratitude for the work he has left. It was the right book at the right time, the serene proclamation of law

as he unrolled the history of humanity before me from its earliest germs."

Now I confess to a certain sense of confusion in reading all this. In the first place, Buckle did not do what he is alleged to have done. He did not unroll the history of humanity from its earliest germs. His work was a great one, but that is not a proper description of it. In the next place, I can hardly conceive that Mathilde Blind had not read Buckle when I knew her, and she was certainly an Atheist then. Clifford was so far from being ashamed of the designation that he gloried in it, and we all understood that Mathilde Blind's attitude was precisely similar. What on earth then could she mean by saying that Buckle saved her from "blank Atheism"? What, indeed, is there in Buckle incompatible with Atheism? Did not his orthodox critics call him a teacher of the Atheistic philosophy? Not that he *was* an Atheist, but as far as his book went it was not unnatural that they (at any rate) should think him so. It does not appear that Mathilde Blind herself ever became a positive Theist. I fancy she called herself to the end an Agnostic. Her own poetry is not the work of a believer in God. What on earth then, I repeat, did she mean by the statement that she had been saved from "blank Atheism"? And what is the meaning of the words that follow? "Utter denial" of *what*? And "despair" of *what*? The whole thing is like a Chinese puzzle.

I cannot help thinking that Mathilde Blind, writing perhaps in after years, when Clifford was dead, and when perhaps the great Bradlaugh struggle had rendered "Atheism" more odious than ever to the great mob of "respectable" people, used the word with that looseness which is only too common, but of which *she* ought not to have been guilty. It is curious how so many persons, and orthodox teachers especially, are loth

to let "Atheism" stand by itself, and tell its own story. They seem to feel the necessity of prejudicing the reader (or hearer) against it at the very outset. So they hasten to put a suggestive, or even a sinister, adjective in front of it, as a kind of warning herald. Sometimes it is "downright" Atheism, sometimes it is "utter" Atheism, sometimes it is "grovelling" Atheism, sometimes it is "blatant" Atheism. This, by the way, is the favorite adjective of gentlemen like the late Rev. Mr. Price Hughes. But "blank" Atheism is perhaps the most ingenious form of depreciation. The horrified imagination of piety is free to fill in the "blank" according to the instant movement of the spirit. Then it has at least a suggestion of swearing. It sounds like a polite or fastidious form of "*damned* Atheism," or even one of those stronger expletives which are so common in the streets of Christian cities. Yes, "blank Atheism" is distinctly good, and may be recommended to the average apologists of religion, who might blunder into obvious bad language if left to their own resources.

When one comes to think of it, however, it is perfectly clear that Atheism is only "blank" in the sense that it is not Theism. Atheists dispense with what they regard as fictions, but they retain what they (and everybody else, for that matter) regard as facts. They dismiss dreams, but they cling to realities. They roam the earth, though they believe in no hell under it. They admire the ever-shifting panorama of the sky, though they believe in no heaven above it. They breathe the universal air, though they do not believe it is peopled with invisible spirits. All that anyone is sure of is theirs. The "blank" in their minds and lives only relates to the unknown, the incomprehensible, and perhaps the impossible.

What is it that the Theist *knows* and the Atheist does *not* know? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. To the

greatest minds, as well as the smallest, God is at the best an inference ; and the doctrine of a future life can only be verified (if at all) by dying. In this world, therefore, and on this side of death, the Atheist has, or may have, as much information as any religionist. Nor has he fewer sources of enjoyment, or fewer means of personal development and elevation, or fewer opportunities of social usefulness. The "blank" only means that he does not burden his mind with the contradictory fancies of theology. He objects to wasting his time in trying to find the value of the infinite X. And he has learnt from history that the pursuit of such chimeras has produced a very decided "blank"—as far as secular science and civilisation are concerned—in the minds and lives of many men of genius, and of whole societies of inferior mortals.

SOME PUBLICATIONS BY G. W. FOOTE.

Bible Romances.

160 pp. Cloth. 2s.

Bible Heroes.

200 pp. Cloth. 2s. 6d.

Bible Handbook FOR FREETHINKERS AND
INQUIRING CHRISTIANS.

Paper Covers, 1s. 6d, Cloth, 2s. 6d.

The Book of God

In the Light of the Higher Criticism.

Paper, 1s. Cloth, 2s.

Flowers of Freethought.

FIRST AND SECOND SERIES.

Cloth, 2s, 6d. (each).

Scores of Essays and Articles on a vast variety of
Freethought Topics.

Crimes of Christianity.

Hundreds of References to Standard Authorities.

Cloth, 2s. 6d.

Theism or Atheism ?

Public Debate with Rev. W. T. Lee.

Boards, 1s.

Christianity and Secularism.

Public Debate with Rev. Dr. McCann.

Paper Covers, 1s. Cloth, 1s. 6d.

Comic Sermons & other Fantasias

Paper Covers, 8d.

Darwin on God.

Paper Covers, 6d.

London : The Freethought Publishing Company, Ltd.,
2 Newcastle-street, Farringdon-street, E.C.