

THE MANY FACES OF UNBELIEF [PART I]

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

One of the most mind-numbing mysteries for those who believe in God is trying to understand the unbelief of those who do not. As one who writes and lectures often on the topics of apologetics and evidences, I frequently am asked the question: “What causes people **not** to believe in God?” Generally, the motive behind the question is not derogatory, but complimentary. That is to say, the querist really is asking: “Why is it that **obviously intelligent** people do not believe in God?”

Neither question is easy to answer because usually the person doing the asking wants a simple, quick, concise response. It is difficult for the inquirer to understand why people who are “obviously intelligent” refuse to believe in God. It has been my experience that rarely is there a single reason for unbelief, because rarely is there a single reason that can explain adequately why a person thinks, or acts, as he does.

THE “FREEDOM” OF UNBELIEF

Surely a part of the answer has to do with the fact that when God created humans, He endowed us with **freedom of choice** (often referred to as “personal volition” or “free moral agency”). This stands to reason, considering Who God is. The Bible describes Him as being, among other things, a God of love (1 John 4:8). Even a cursory survey of the Scriptures documents God’s desire that man, as the zenith

of His creation, possess, and employ, the freedom of choice with which he has been endowed. The truth of the matter is that God did not create mankind as some kind of robot to serve Him slavishly without any personal choice in the matter.

For example, when Joshua—who had led the Israelite nation so faithfully for so long—realized that his days were numbered and his hours were few, he assembled the entirety of that nation before him and, in one of the most moving, impassioned pleas recorded within the pages of Holy Writ, admonished his charges to employ their personal volition in a proper fashion.

And if it seem evil unto you to serve Jehovah, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah (Joshua 24:15).

Joshua’s point could not have been any clearer. The Israelites, individually and collectively, had the ability, and yes, even the God-given right, to choose whether or not they wished to follow Jehovah. As the text continues, it indicates that on this particular occasion they chose correctly.

And the people answered and said, Far be it from us that we should forsake Jehovah, to serve other gods.... And Israel served Jehovah all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and had known all the work of Jehovah that

he had wrought for Israel (Joshua 24:16,31).

Years later, however, the people of Israel—employing that same heaven-sent personal volition—freely chose to abandon their belief in, and obedience to, God. Judges 2:10-11 records:

[T]here arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel. And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served the Baalim.

Within the pages of the New Testament, the principle is the same. When Jesus condemned the self-righteousness of the Pharisees in John 5:39-40, He made this observation: “Ye search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me; and ye **will not** come to me, that ye may have life.” The Pharisees of New Testament times possessed the same freedom of choice that the Israelites of Old Testament times possessed. But while the Israelites to whom Joshua spoke chose at first to heed his plea and obey Jehovah, the Pharisees to whom Christ spoke chose to ignore His plea and to disobey God.

Two chapters later, when Jesus addressed the Jews in their own temple, the text indicates that they marveled at His teaching (John 7:15). But Jesus demurred, and said: “My teaching is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man **willeth** to do his will, he shall know of the teaching,

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whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself” (John 7:16-17). Jesus’ point to the devout temple Jews was no different than the one He had made earlier to the legalistic Pharisees. God has imbued mankind with the ability to **choose**. If a person **wills**, he can accept God and His teaching, but God never will force Himself on that person. As the apostle John brought the book of Revelation to a close, he wrote: “he that will, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22:17). The operative phrase here, of course, is “he that will.”

But what of he that **will not**? Freedom is accompanied by responsibility. With freedom of choice comes the responsibility to think carefully, choose wisely, and act forcefully. Freedom of choice always works best when tempered with wisdom and good judgment. Thus, in every human activity the process of recognizing, believing, and properly utilizing truth is vitally important. Especially is this true in the spiritual realm. Jesus tried to impress this upon His generation when He said: “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). What we as humans so often fail to realize is that we are not involved in a search for truth because **it** is lost; we are involved in a search for truth because without **it we** are!

Some, however, have elected to employ their freedom of choice to ignore the truth regarding God’s existence and to disobey His Word. They are the spiritual descendants of the first-century Pharisees; they **could** come to a knowledge of the truth, but they **will not**. The simple fact of the matter is that we are responsible for what we choose to believe. Using the personal volition with which God has endowed us, we may choose freely to believe in Him, or we may choose just as freely to disbelieve. The choice is up to each individual. And once that individual has made up his mind to disbelieve, God will not deter him, as Paul made clear when he wrote his second epistle to the Thessalonians. In that letter, he spoke first of those who “received not the love of the truth” (2:10), and then went on to say that “for this cause God sendeth them a working of error, that they should believe a lie” (2 Thessalonians 2:11).

What, exactly, was Paul suggesting? Was the apostle teaching that God **purposely** causes men to believe error? No, he was not. Paul’s point in this passage was that we may choose to accept something as the truth when, in fact, it is false. Because God has granted man personal volition, and because He has provided within the Bible the rules, regulations, and guidelines to govern that personal volition, He therefore will refrain from overriding man’s freedom of choice—even when that choice violates His law. God will not contravene man’s decisions, or interfere with the actions based on those decisions. The prophet Isaiah recorded God’s words on this subject many years before when he wrote:

Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations: I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did that which was evil in mine eyes, and chose that wherein I delighted not (Isaiah 66:3-4).

Concerning the people who refused to have God in their knowledge, and who exchanged truth for error, Paul repeatedly stated that “God gave them up” (Romans 1:24,26,28). In his commentary on the Thessalonian epistles, Raymond C. Kelcy addressed the fact that men often prefer the consequences of a certain belief system, and that as a result

God gives the man over to the belief of the lie which he prefers. In a sense it might be said that the means by which a person is deceived is God’s permissive agency—not God’s direct agency (1968, p. 157).

There is an exact parallel in the instance of the Pharaoh who sparred with Moses and Aaron over the release of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. When Moses and Aaron arrived at Pharaoh’s court as God’s ambassadors to demand the release of the enslaved Israelites, they told the pagan potentate: “Thus saith Jehovah, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go.’” Pharaoh’s response, preserved in Scripture for posterity, foreshadowed the attitude of millions of unbelievers who would imitate the militant monarch’s demeanor of disbelief throughout the course of human history:

“Who is Jehovah, that I should hearken unto his voice to let Israel go? **I know not Jehovah**, and moreover I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:1-2, emp. added).

Several times the biblical text records that it was God Who “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20,27; 11:10; 14:8). Are we to understand, therefore, that God **caused** Pharaoh’s stubborn attitude of disbelief? Certainly not. The simple fact of the matter is that God did not cause Pharaoh to harden his heart and disobey, but instead **permitted** the ruler’s actions. The Scriptures speak to this point when they acknowledge that Pharaoh himself “hardened his heart” (Exodus 8:15,32; 9:34-35). In their commentary on the Pentateuch, Keil and Delitzsch addressed Pharaoh’s hardness of heart, even after he witnessed the miraculous plagues sent by God.

After every one of these miracles, it is stated that Pharaoh’s heart was firm, or dull, i.e. insensible to the voice of God, and unaffected by the miracles performed before his eyes, and the judgments of God suspended over him and his kingdom.... Thus Pharaoh would not bend his self-will to the will of God, even after he had discerned the finger of God and the omnipotence of Jehovah in the plagues suspended over him and his nation; he would not withdraw his haughty refusal, notwithstanding the fact that he was obliged to acknowledge that it was sin against Jehovah. Looked at from this side, the hardening was a fruit of sin, a consequence of that self-will, high-mindedness, and pride which flow from sin, and a continuous and ever increasing **abuse of that freedom of the will** which is innate in man, and which involves the possibility of obstinate resistance to the word and chastisement of God even until death (1981, pp. 454,455, emp. added).

Pharaoh’s hard heart was not God’s doing, but his own. God’s **permissive agency** was involved, but not His **direct agency**. That is to say, He allowed Pharaoh to use (or abuse, as Keil and Delitzsch correctly noted) his freedom of will in a vain attempt to thwart God’s plans. Throughout history, God’s actions have been consistent in this regard. The psalmist wrote:

But my people hearkened not to my voice; and Israel would not hear me. So I let them go after the stubbornness of their heart, that they might walk in their own counsels (Psalm 81:11-12).

Concerning the rebellious Israelites, Paul wrote in Romans 11:8 (quoting from Isaiah 29:10): “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear.” In every generation, God has granted mankind the freedom of self-determination to be blind to His existence, and in so doing to believe a lie. E.M. Zerr put it well when he said:

The Bible in no place teaches that God ever forces a man to sin, then punishes him for the wrong-doing. Neither does He compel man against his will to do right, but has always offered him proper inducements for righteous conduct, then left it to his own responsibility to decide what he will do about it (1952, 5:159).

The same principles operate even today, almost two thousand years later. If an acknowledgment of God’s existence and obedience to His Word make us free (John 8:32), surely, then, disbelief and disobedience make us captives of one sort or another. Set adrift in a vast sea of confusing and contradictory world views, we find ourselves susceptible to every ill-conceived plan, deceptive scheme, and false concept that the winds of change may blow our way. We become captives to error because we have abandoned the one moral compass—the existence of God—that possesses the ability to show us the way, and thereby to set us free.

Throughout history, unbelief has worn many masks. But behind each is a Pharaoh-like spirit of rebellion that—in angry defiance—raises a clenched fist to God in a display of unrepentant determination **not** to believe in Him. An examination of the faces, and causes, of unbelief is both informative and instructive.

THE MANY FACES OF UNBELIEF

Atheism

In his book, *If There’s a God, Why Are There Atheists?*, R.C. Sproul noted in regard to theism that “literally, the word means ‘Godism,’ that is belief in God. It is derived

from *theos*, the Greek word for God” (1978, p. 16). Chief among unbelievers, then, would be the **atheist** (*a*, without; *theos*, God)—the person who affirms that there is no God. As Sproul went on to observe: “Atheism involves the rejection of any form of theism. To be an atheist is to disavow belief in any kind of god or gods” (p. 18). In his book, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God*, Alister McGrath noted:

The atheist is prepared to concede—no, that is too negative a word, to **celebrate**—the need for commitment and the existence of evidence to move one in the direction of that commitment. In other words, the atheist recognizes the need to come off the fence and the fact that there are factors in the world of human experience and thought that suggest which side of the fence that ought to be. At present, the atheist happens to sit on the godless side of that fence (1993, p. 81, emp. in orig.).

Bruce Lockerbie, in *Dismissing God*, referred to atheism as “the abdication of belief,” and described the person who falls into this category.

For the ardent disbeliever, the hypothesis and its given propositions are one and the same: **God does not exist**.... All that has energized the human imagination and motivated the human spirit with prospects of nirvana, the Elysian Fields, the happy hunting grounds, paradise, or heaven—all that is meant when the Book of Ecclesiastes declares that God “has set eternity in the hearts of men” — must be invalidated by counterclaims of atheism (1998, pp. 225, 227, emp. in orig.).

This, no doubt, explains why a famous unbeliever like the late Carl Sagan, eminent atheist/astronomer of Cornell University, opened his television extravaganza *Cosmos* (and his book by the same name) with these words: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be” (1980, p. 4). Commenting on the exclusivity of that statement, D. James Kennedy wrote: “That is as clear a statement of atheism as one could ever hear” (1997, p. 61).

Declaring oneself to be an atheist, however, is much easier than defending the concept of atheism. Think of it this way. In order to defend atheism, a person would

have to know **every single fact** there is to know, because the one fact that avoided detection might just be the fact of the existence of God. Theodore Christlieb noted:

The denial of the existence of God involves a perfectly monstrous hypothesis; it is, when looked at more closely, an unconscionable assumption. Before one can say that the world is without a God, he must first have become thoroughly conversant with the whole world.... In short, to be able to affirm authoritatively that no God exists, a man must be omniscient and omnipresent, that is, he himself must be God, and then after all there would be one (1878, pp. 143,144).

Impossible task, that—since one would have to **be** God in order to believe with certainty that there is no God! Yet, as apologist Dan Story has pointed out,

...[T]his fact stops few atheists from arguing against the existence of God. Rather than admitting (or even recognizing) the irrationality of their own position, many atheists attempt to remove the rationality of the Christian position.... These atheists argue that because they don't believe in God, because their belief is negative, they don't have to marshal any arguments in their favor (1997, p. 20).

Evidence of such a stance abounds. Atheistic writer George H. Smith, in his book, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, wrote:

Proof is applicable only in the case of a positive belief. To demand proof of the atheist, the religionist must represent atheism as a positive belief requiring substantiation. When the atheist is seen as a person who lacks belief in a god, it becomes clear that he is not obligated to “prove” anything. The atheist *qua* atheist does not believe anything requiring demonstration; the designation of “atheist” tells us, not what he believes to be true, but what he does **not** believe to be true. If others wish for him to accept the existence of a god, it is their responsibility to argue for the truth of theism—but the atheist is not similarly required to argue for the truth of atheism (1979, p. 16, emp. in orig.)

Such a view, however, is seriously flawed for at least two reasons. First, theists

do not make the statement, “God exists,” with wild abandon, expecting it to be accepted as if somehow it were spoken by divine fiat. Rather, when they defend God's existence, theists offer **evidence** to back up their case (e.g., the cosmological argument, teleological argument, moral argument, etc.)—which places the matter of the existence of God in an entirely different perspective. As Story properly noted:

*God will not
contravene man's
decisions, or
interfere with the
actions based on
those decisions.*

Christians have given ample evidence for the existence of the Judeo-Christian God. In light of this, if atheists claim God does not exist, they must be prepared to explain why. When Christians state that God exists and offer evidences to support this claim, they have moved the debate into a new arena—an arena in which atheists must prove that the Christian **evidences** are erroneous (1997, p. 20, emp. in orig.).

If **evidence** for God's existence has been set forth, the atheist has a responsibility (if he expects his world view to be considered seriously and accepted intellectually) to show **why** such evidence is not legitimate. After all, the Law of Rationality (one of the foundational laws of human thought) states that one should draw only those conclusions for which there is adequate and justifiable evidence. Indifference to such evidence—in light of the claim made by the atheist that God does not exist—could prove to be suicidal philosophically. The evidence just might docu-

ment the theist's claim. And in the process, the atheist just might be proven wrong!

Second, in his book, *Dismissing God*, under the chapter heading, “When Disbelief Has Gone,” Bruce Lockerbie rightly remarked:

To **disbelieve** necessitates the possibility of a reasonable alternative, namely to **believe**. So “when disbelief has gone” means that the secular mind has passed even beyond this stage of contesting with Christian orthodoxy, no longer deigning to concern itself with the fantasies of faith (1998, p. 228, emp. in orig.).

While it may be the case that the modern-day unbeliever no longer deigns to concern himself with what he views as “fantasies of faith,” such an attitude does nothing to address the evidence presented by the theist. Nor does indifference to the theist's evidence on the part of the atheist do anything to establish whatever type of unbelief the atheist wishes to recommend in its place. Lockerbie is correct: “To **disbelieve** necessitates the possibility of a reasonable alternative, namely to **believe**.” Thus, the atheist shoulders two burdens: (1) to prove the theist's evidence is invalid; and (2) to establish—with attending evidence—a belief system that is a “reasonable alternative” worthy of acceptance by rational, thinking people.

Neither of these tasks is simple (or, theists would suggest, possible). One problem that, by necessity, would have to be broached from the outset is this. For whatever reason(s), many atheists appear unwilling to consider the evidence in the first place. Robert Gorham Davis is a retired professor of English at Harvard University who spends much of his time writing letters to the editor of the *New York Times* in order to take exception to any published reference to religion in that newspaper. In one such letter to the editor, he wrote:

On no clear evidence theologians and philosophers declare God to be omniscient and omniscipotent. Plainly **if there were such a God who really wished to reveal Himself to mankind, He could do so in a way that left no doubt** (1992, emp. added).

That God **did** reveal Himself “in a way that left no doubt” is made clear from such evidence as: (1) the marvelous order and complexity of the macrocosm we call the Universe; (2) the intricate, delicately balanced nature of life; (3) the deliberate design inherent in the microcosm we know as the incomparable genetic code; (4) the astounding historical testimony attesting to the miracle-working Son of God; and (5) an otherwise unexplained (and unexplainable) empty tomb on a Sunday morning almost two thousand years ago. Each of these pieces of evidence (and many more like them) helps form the warp and woof of the fabric whose purpose it is to document God’s eternal existence.

That the atheist does not consider the evidence to be trustworthy or adequate to the task **does not negate the evidence necessarily**. A man’s attitude toward the truth does not alter the truth. As Winfried Corduan stated in his book, *Reasonable Faith*:

An argument, in order to be considered sound, must have true premises and valid logic. Because we think within the context of world views, someone may not be convinced by a perfectly sound argument. This is an everyday occurrence in all human reasoning and attempts at persuasion. **That is no fault of the argument...** (1993, p. 106, emp. added).

The late atheist, Isaac Asimov, once bluntly admitted: “Emotionally, I am an atheist. I don’t have the evidence to prove that God doesn’t exist, but I so strongly suspect he doesn’t that I don’t want to waste my time” (1982, p. 9). Such a boast is easy

enough to understand, and requires no further explanation. Yes, Dr. Asimov was a committed atheist, but not because he could offer adequate, legitimate reasons to justify his unbelief. Rather, his world view was an emotional response resulting from his personal freedom of choice.

The fact remains that after everything is said and done, the atheist’s first option—disproving the theist’s evidence—is a difficult challenge that many choose not to accept.

What, then, about option number two—providing, with attending evidence, a belief system that is a “reasonable alternative”? That, too, apparently is beyond the pale of atheism. In 1989, Richard Dawkins, renowned atheist and evolutionist of Oxford University, authored a book by the title of *The Selfish Gene*, in which he discussed at great length the gene’s role in the naturalistic process of “survival of the fittest.” Dawkins admitted that, according to the evolutionary paradigm, genes are “selfish” because they will do whatever it takes to ensure that the individual in which they are stored produces additional copies of the genes. In commenting on the effects of such a concept on society as a whole, Dr. Dawkins lamented: “My own feeling is that a human society based simply on the gene’s law of universal ruthlessness **would be a very nasty society in which to live**” (1989, p. 3, emp. added).

Michael Ruse, a Canadian philosopher, and Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard entomologist, had made the same point four years earlier when they wrote under the title of “Evolution and Ethics”:

Morality, or more strictly **our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends...** Ethics is seen to have a solid foundation, not in divine guidance, but in the shared qualities of human nature and the desperate need for reciprocity (1985, 208:51-52, emp. added).

The eminent humanist/philosopher, Will Durant, went even further when he admitted:

By offering evolution in place of God as a cause of history, Darwin removed the theological basis of the moral code of Christendom. And the moral code that has no fear of God is very shaky. That’s the condition we are in.... I don’t think man is capable yet of managing social order and individual decency without fear of some supernatural being overlooking him and able to punish him (1980).

Once again, the fact remains that after everything is said and done, the atheist’s second option—providing, with attending evidence, a belief system that is a “reasonable alternative”—is an unattainable goal. Enter “agnosticism.”

Agnosticism

Perhaps the logical contradiction inherent in atheism (i.e., one would have to **be** God in order to **know** God does not exist) has caused many unbelievers to affirm agnosticism instead. The **agnostic** (*a*, without; *gnosis*, knowledge) is the person who says it is impossible to know if God exists, due to the fact that there simply is not enough credible evidence to warrant such a conclusion. Sproul believes that “the agnostic seeks to declare neutrality on the issue, desiring to make neither assertion nor denial of the theistic question.... The agnostic maintains that there is insufficient knowledge upon which to make an intellectual judgment about theism” (1978, pp. 19-20).

The term “agnostic” was coined by British scientist Thomas Henry Huxley, a close personal friend of Charles Darwin’s and an indefatigable champion of evolution who frequently referred to himself as “Darwin’s Bulldog.” Huxley first introduced the word in a speech in 1869 before



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the Metaphysical Society. He later wrote of that occurrence:

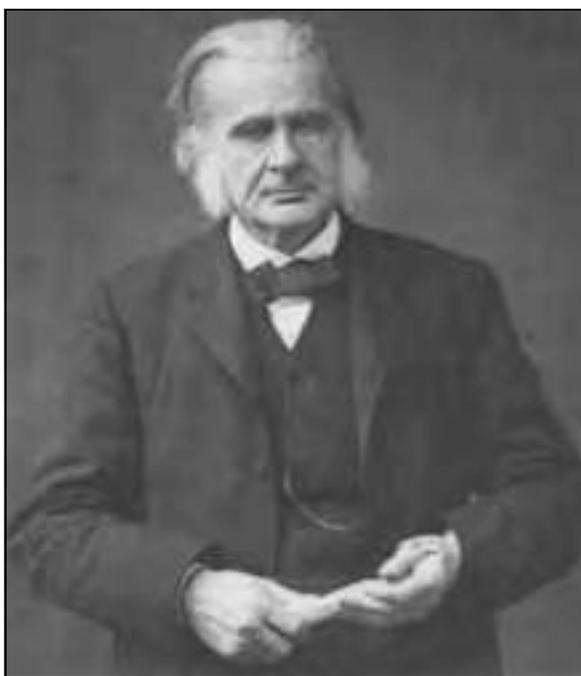
When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had 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....

This was my situation when I had the good fortune to find a place among the members of that remarkable confraternity of antagonists, long since deceased, but of green and pious memory, the Metaphysical Society. Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there, and expressed itself with entire openness; most of my colleagues were *-ists* of one sort or another.... 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; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society.... To my great satisfaction, the term took.... This is the history of the origin of the terms “agnostic” and “agnosticism” (1894, pp. 239-240, italics in orig.).

Huxley cannot be accused of inventing the term “agnostic” in a cavalier fashion. Nor can he be accused of harboring a “hidden agenda.” He knew exactly what he was doing, and went about doing it in a most public fashion. He spoke often to “working class folks,” frequently presenting lunch-time lectures at factories. In a letter to a friend written on March 22, 1861, he remarked: “My working men stick by me wonderfully. By Friday evening they will all be convinced that they are monkeys” (see Leonard Huxley, 1900, 1:205). He was passionate about referring to Charles Darwin as the “Newton of biology” (see Blinderman, 1957, p. 174), and did not hesitate to affirm that, so far as he was concerned,

I really believe that the alternative is either Darwinism or nothing, for I do not know of any rational conception or theory of the organic universe which has any scientific position at all besides Mr. Darwin’s.... Whatever may be the objections to his views, certainly all other theories are out of court (1896, p. 467).



Thomas H. Huxley championed Darwin’s theory of evolution, and coined a new word—agnostic.

Huxley worked diligently to convince those around him that agnosticism was a respectable philosophical position, and that it was quite **impossible** to know whether or not God existed. Yet he simultaneously advocated the position that it was quite **possible** to deny some theistic claims with certainty. He “knew,” for example, that the Bible was not God’s Word, and openly ridiculed anyone who believed it to be so. He heaped scathing rebukes upon those who believed in what he termed “the myths of Genesis,” and he stated categorically that “my sole point is to get people who persist in regarding them as statements of fact to understand that they are fools” (see Leonard Huxley, 1900, 2:429).

That Huxley had in mind antagonistic views toward Judeo-Christian theism when he claimed to be “agnostic” has been made clear by those who otherwise would have no reason to be biased against Huxley. For example, under the heading, “agnosticism,” the authors of the British-produced *Encyclopaedia Britannica* wrote:

Agnosticism both as a term and as a philosophical position gained currency through its espousal by Thomas Huxley, who seems to have coined the word “agnostic” (as opposed to “gnostic”) in 1869 to designate one who repudiated traditional Judeo-Christian theism and yet disclaimed doctrinaire atheism, transcending both in order to leave such questions as the existence of God in abeyance.... But Huxley’s own elaboration on the term **makes it clear that this very biblical interpretation of man’s relation to God was the intended polemic target of agnosticism.** The suspension of judgment on ultimate questions for which it called was thought to **invalidate Christian beliefs** about “things hoped for” and “things not seen....” Huxley himself certainly rejected as outright false—rather than as not known to be true or false—many widely popular views about God, his providence, and man’s posthumous destiny... (1997a, 1:151; 26:569, emp. added).

Rather than courageously embrace and defend atheism, Huxley opted to feign ignorance with his “I don’t know, you don’t know, nobody knows, and nobody can

know” position. This cowardly compromise did not endear him to those who were quite willing to champion the more radical stance of apodictically affirming that God does not exist. In their discussion of agnosticism under the section on “religious and spiritual belief systems,” the editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* noted that

Huxley and his associates were attacked both by enthusiastic Christian polemicists and by Friedrich Engels, the co-worker of Karl Marx, as “shame-faced atheists,” a **description that is perfectly applicable to many of those who nowadays adopt the more comfortable label** (1997b, 26:569, emp. added).

The fact is, the agnostic is far from indifferent. He takes his agnosticism extremely seriously when he affirms that nothing outside of the material world can be known or proved. But agnosticism is built upon a self-defeating premise. English philosopher Herbert Spencer (also a close personal friend of Charles Darwin, the man from whom Darwin borrowed his now-popular phrase, “survival of the fittest,” and popularly regarded as one of the foremost apostles of agnosticism in his day) advocated the position that just as no bird ever has been able to fly out of the heavens, so no man ever has been able to penetrate with his finite mind the veil that hides the mind of the Infinite. This inability on the part of the finite (mankind), he concluded, prevented any knowledge of the Infinite (God) reaching the finite.

Such a premise is flawed internally because it wrongly assumes that the Infinite is equally incapable of penetrating the veil—a position that reduces the term “Infinite” to absurdity. An Infinite Being that is unable to express Itself is less finite than mortals who forever are expressing themselves. And an Infinite Being that is both capable of self-expression and aware of the perplexity and needs of mortal man, yet fails to break through the veil, is less moral than mortal man. As one writer expressed it:

What **man** would stay in shrouded silence if he were the Infinite and knew that a word from him would resolve a thousand human complexes, integrate shattered personalities, mend broken lives, bring coveted

light to baffled minds, and healing peace to disturbed hearts? (Samuel, 1950, p. 14, emp. added).

To be either correct or defensible, Spencer’s proposition must work **both** ways. Finite man must be unable to penetrate the veil to the Infinite, but at the same time the Infinite likewise must be unable to penetrate the veil to the finite. By definition, however, the Infinite would possess the capability of breaking through any such veil.

Further, there is a question that begs to be asked: Will the agnostic admit that it is at least **possible** for **someone else to know** something he does not? If he is unwilling to admit this point, is he not then attributing to himself (even if inadvertently) one of the defining characteristics that theists attribute to God—omniscience? In commenting on this very point, Nelson M. Smith wrote:

Obviously, no agnostic can speak for anyone but himself and perhaps not then. What effort has he made to know God? Has he exhausted every effort to know God? Maybe he has not been as honest with himself and with the evidence as he ought to be? Maybe he is unconsciously hiding behind a screen of “can’t know” to avoid responsibility as a being made in God’s image of facing his Maker? (1975, 92[6]:6).

Smith’s point is well taken. Is it not possible that the agnostic is avoiding—purposely—the evidence for the existence of God? Rather than being **unable** to know, perhaps the agnostic is **unwilling** to find out. Sir Hector Hetherington, Principal Emeritus of Glasgow University, addressed this concept when he said:

There are issues on which it is impossible to be neutral. These issues strike right down to the roots of man’s existence. And while it is right that we should examine the evidence, and make sure that we have all the evidence, it is equally right that **we ourselves should be accessible to the evidence** (as quoted in Samuel, 1950, p. 29, emp. added).

The agnostic is perfectly **capable** of making himself “accessible to the evidence.” The question is—**will** he? Or will he choose instead to hide “behind a screen of ‘can’t know’”?

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

QUIET CELEBRATION—AND A WARM WELCOME...

When you first examine this issue of *Reason & Revelation*, it may not appear to be special in any way. But it is. Allow me to explain.

For most of its nineteen-year history, the *R&R* subscription base has “hovered” right around 4,000. During the summer of 1998, however, we set a goal to double our readership. And double it we did! During the period from June through August, we gained over 4,000 readers.

But we did not stop there. Early this year, we set two new goals, the first of which was to double the number of subscribers to *R&R*—**again!** As a result of our continuing efforts, we are well on our way to accomplishing that goal.

When someone subscribes to *R&R*, or receives a subscription as a gift, we send them the current issue of *Reason & Revelation*, our new 1999 twentieth-anniversary catalog, a brochure that explains the various services we offer, a packet of information introducing many of our products, and a sample copy of *Discovery*, our monthly paper on Scripture and science for children. And if the subscription is a gift, we also include a personalized note acknowledging the giver.

As this issue of *Reason & Revelation* goes to press, we are in the process of adding literally hundreds of new subscribers on a monthly basis. **For the first time in the nineteen-year history of the journal, it appears that our subscriber base will surpass 10,000 readers**—a fact that makes this issue “special,” (and is cause for quiet celebration on our part).

I wanted to use my “Note from the Editor” this month to offer all of our new subscribers (and there are many!) a warm welcome from those of us associated with Apologetics Press. We are thrilled to have you as a part of the *R&R* family and hope that you enjoy each and every issue. In fact, we hope you enjoy it so much that you, too, will want to give subscriptions as gifts to friends, loved ones, relatives, neighbors, or those with whom you are studying God’s Word. *Reason &*

Revelation is an invaluable tool for strengthening the faith of someone who already is a Christian, or building faith in someone who is not.

Our second goal for 1999 is to double the number of children receiving *Discovery*. Currently, we are mailing approximately 8,000 copies of the paper each month. By the end of this year, we hope to see that number climb to over 15,000! To that end, we are doing several things. First, we are in the process of mailing over 30,000 copies of *Discovery* to various home schooling fairs and conventions throughout the United States—copies that will end up in the hands of parents and children who already have an above-average interest in the type of Bible/science articles included in each issue of the paper. Second, we are offering home schoolers a 10% discount on one- or two-year subscriptions. Third, we are preparing a huge mailout to send to readers of both of our journals (and to thousands of readers of other journals across the nation) during the months of May-July. Included in that mailout will be a sample copy of the magazine, plus a special offer for those who might wish to receive *Discovery* themselves or give it to a child as a gift.

We are serious about “getting the word out” about our two monthly journals. Why not give someone a gift subscription to either, or both? *Reason & Revelation* costs only \$6/year; *Discovery* costs only \$11. [NOTE: It always has been our policy to send *R&R* free of charge to those who are incarcerated. If you know someone in that category, feel free to send us their name and address and we will send them a complimentary subscription.] I challenge you to find a better bargain—anywhere! If we can help, please call on us. We are here to serve.

— Bert Thompson