Introduction: The Power of Modern Agnosticism

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A leading English Positivist and advocate of the Religion of Humanity, Frederic Harrison (1831–1923), was in a unique position to prophesy on "The Future of Agnosticism." In addition to maintaining personal friendships with the leading agnostics of the day, he could sympathize with their attack on traditional theology and vague metaphysics. However, his commitment to Auguste Comte led him to adopt an attitude favorable to some type of organized religion, and that position placed him outside the pale of agnosticism. In the pages of the *Fortnightly Review* for January 1889, Harrison took on the role of seer and presented his vision of the future in order to determine whether the widespread agnostic phase of mind could be permanent, final, and creative. He asked, "Is Agnosticism a substantive religious belief at all? Can it grow into a religious belief? Can it supersede religious belief?" Harrison concluded that agnosticism as a "creed" would not stand the test of time, that it had no future due to its purely destructive character. Agnosticism was "a state of no-religion," and since man was by nature a religious animal, the inadequacy of the agnostic position would eventually be discovered (pp. 144, 149).

But although Harrison's crystal ball told him that agnosticism as a distinct school of thought would vanish completely, he also predicted, paradoxically, that "agnostic logic" would become universally accepted as part of our intellectual baggage. As "minds are more commonly imbued with the sense of physical law," Harrison decreed, agnostic logic was bound to become an "axiom of ordinary thought, almost a truism or a commonplace" [p. 154]. Although Harrison's pessimism about the survival of agnosticism as a distinct faith obviously serves as a convenient pretext for displaying the superior charms of his lady liege Positivism, his assessment of agnosticism's fate was surprisingly accurate. Agnosticism as a "creed" died with Leslie Stephen, in 1904, while the power of agnostic assumptions lived on in the early
twentieth century in various forms, sometimes appearing in humanist philosophies, at other times in the shape of positivism or secularism.

It is not often these days that we find intellectuals willing to call themselves, first and foremost, agnostics. But, in general, agnosticism today represents a pervasive yet diffuse attitude that has moved in quite a different direction when we recall the self-assurance of agnostics such as T. H. Huxley when they confidently proclaimed their position. Baumer has perceptively portrayed the strange situation in which twentieth-century agnosticism finds itself. Similar to other types of scepticism, it “has now become a problem where once it seemed a release and a relief.”  

Baumer calls our century “The Age of Longing” (after Arthur Koestler’s novel) in order to symbolize how irreligious scepticism has combined in a new way with a longing for the God who is dead or for a God not yet born. Where Huxley exulted in his feeling of liberation from the oppressive bonds of Christian faith, Baumer sees in the despair of modern scepticism an agonizing sense of loss and an awareness that, in spite of its logical consistency, religious unbelief makes life seem meaningless and hollow.

A poignant case is presented by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the few modern sceptics who is a self-proclaimed agnostic. In a symposium on science and religion in 1931, Malinowski refers to modern agnosticism as “a tragic and shattering frame of mind.” There can be no doubt that Baumer is onto something of immense importance here. Many of the convictions held by Victorian agnostics which gave their agnosticism its vitality and forward-looking optimism have not survived the shock of two great wars, the inhumanity of Fascism, and the threat of nuclear destruction. The texture and very existence of the original agnosticism was closely bound up with the spirit of the Victorian age and the continued well-being of liberalism. Huxley’s almost naive belief in progress and his faith in the potential of science can scarcely be accepted today. Agnosticism has become tragic—a position forced upon us against our wills by a twentieth-century worldview steeped in scientific assumptions. “Is science responsible for my agnosticism,” Malinowski asks, “and for that of others who think like me? I believe it is, and therefore I do not love science, though I have to remain its loyal servant.”

What a terrible confession to wring from the lips of an anthropologist, and what a dilemma for modern man! Modern agnosticism is ingrained in our consciousness, according to Harrison, and seems to confront us with two equally unattractive alternatives. Either we unlovingly accept science and the agnosticism it apparently demands, thereby alienating ourselves from the spiritual world of religion, or we give up the search for knowledge and rush unthinkingly to embrace religion.
The forces that first led to the birth of agnosticism and then later transformed it almost beyond recognition have created numerous pitfalls in the way of undertaking a historical study of agnosticism. There is a special difficulty in interpreting the origins of agnosticism which requires the historian to become conscious of his own presuppositions about the world. The twentieth-century North American and British worldview, which is molded by the rise of evolutionary theory, the development of agnosticism, and the pervasiveness of empiricism, is the very obstruction blinding us to the story of the origins of agnosticism. We hold in common so much with the agnostic frame of mind that it is necessary to distance ourselves from it in order to perceive the historical significance of the agnostics’ thought.

Ultimately we share just enough with the original agnostics to be confronted with two related problems. First, the element of commonality can lead us to flatten down the diverse and protean quality of Victorian agnosticism into a completed picture. The 1860s was an important decade for the formation of the modern religious consciousness. However, there was much in the thought of that decade which is foreign to us today. We look back upon the Victorian period with the benefit of the completed process of the development of agnosticism, and we forget how much the nineteenth century was an age of transition. As a result we de-emphasize the religious quality of agnosticism, the ambivalent attitude of agnostics toward Darwin’s theory of evolution, and their metaphysical idealism. These elements have been extracted from modern agnosticism. As rigorous empiricists, we ignore the Victorian agnostics’ idealism. Inasmuch as Darwin’s theory of natural selection has become scientific orthodoxy, we must remind ourselves that Darwin was not fully vindicated until the early twentieth century and that the agnostics had reservations about accepting Darwinism as the final word on evolution. Due to our tendency to view agnosticism primarily as an antireligious mode of thought, we find it difficult to entertain either the notion that there were many vestiges of traditional religious thought embedded in Victorian agnosticism or the possibility that agnosticism originated in a religious context. Another aspect of this same difficulty is our propensity to view Victorian agnosticism as monolithic in nature. Actually, there were a number of types of agnosticism, including theistic and atheistic varieties.

A second problem concerns our inability to get outside the alleged empiricism of Victorian agnosticism in order to see through its position. In order to present my perspective on agnosticism I will be obliged to undertake a critique of the empiricism that we have inherited from late-nineteenth-century England. In his historical reconstruction of the past, Popkin has also committed himself to a rejection of "most An-
glo-American philosophy," because he perceives in it an atmosphere of triviality that comes from its refusal to face up to the implications of Hume's work. "To get beyond Hume," Popkin argues, "would require some basis for guaranteeing or justifying our knowledge that showed that we could somehow know the nature of reality. The British answer, in failing to come to grips with the basic epistemological issues, has left British philosophy adrift ever since, vacillating between reporting what we have to believe, how we speak, etc., and making a virtue of Humeanism in the form of positivism." We must then look outside the English empiricist tradition for a sophisticated position from which to evaluate the agnostics.

As is well known, it was Hume who awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber. It is only appropriate that we make use of the Kantian perspective in order to transcend the empiricism of Hume and the agnostics. By the Kantian perspective I mean a position that seeks to overcome the fatal opposition between science and religion presented by the powerful but tragic twentieth-century sceptic. Ever since the time of the ancient Greeks, the Western tradition has been confronted by a series of false dualisms of which the science-religion dichotomy is only one example. Body has been opposed to soul, matter to mind, phenomena to noumena, necessity to freedom. Kant wished to approach these so-called opposites in such a way as to make a choice between one or the other unnecessary. He was not prepared to give up either side of each dualism, as he recognized that doing so repressed a significant dimension of human life. By making a critical examination of the extent of reason's powers, and by applying his subsequent conclusion that reason has the ability to ground science as well as to find religious truth, he aimed to preserve both science and religion in their full integrity. Kant has no monopoly on this approach. Other great minds have also attempted a similar project. Indeed, the agnostics themselves claimed to have reconciled science and religion; however, unlike Kant, they failed to reach a consistent position. To single out Kant for special treatment in our study of agnosticism, from among all those who sought unity in human life, is not at all arbitrary and does not require the inclusion of extraneous material. For it is legitimate, as we shall see, to trace agnostic epistemology back to the philosopher of Königsberg. If we are to allow Kant's texts to engage us on all levels, both as documents that are part of the chronology of agnosticism and as works of literature that address us, we cannot neglect what we learn from the questions he raises for us. The re-creative dialogue with the texts of a great thinker should transform our perspective on the origins of agnosticism.
The last major work on Victorian agnosticism, Cockshut's *Unbelievers*, was published in 1966. However, studies of the past decade, by Young, Gillespie, and Moore, have shown that, from the point of view of intellectual history, the Victorian age was much more of a transitional period than was previously thought. Young has pointed to the line of continuity linking the Paleyan tradition with scientific naturalism, Gillespie has made us more aware of the remnants of religious thought embedded in Darwin's mind, and Moore has forced us to re-examine the customary way of viewing the relationship between science and religion through the metaphor of warfare. The catastrophist position in Victorian intellectual history, that 1859 represents a gigantic upheaval in the English philosophical framework, may be losing the struggle for existence. The significant implications of this new literature for our understanding of Victorian unbelief signal the need for new studies of agnosticism which preserve the complexity and continuity of the process of change in Victorian thought patterns.

A beginning effort toward a reinterpretation of agnosticism must deal with the central claim made by all of the original agnostics: that God is unknowable. This is an epistemological assertion that demands of the historian an understanding of the roots of the theory of knowledge constructed by Huxley and his fellow agnostics. We must focus our attention here rather than dwell on the impact of evolutionary theory or the influence of biblical criticism. If we look carefully into the sources of the agnostics' stress on the limits of knowledge, we will find ourselves face to face with the strange discovery that agnosticism owes a profound debt to an epistemological position put forward by a number of ardent Christian thinkers. This is more than a quirk of intellectual history; it points to the religious origins of agnosticism.

Harrison was quite perceptive when he predicted that the agnostic frame of mind would become more prevalent in the twentieth century even as a distinctive agnostic faith would all but disappear. He would have been amused to find that the future he envisioned for agnosticism has erected barriers against attempts by us moderns to recapture its past.