Chapter Five

RELIGION, THEOLOGY, AND
THE CHURCH AGNOSTIC

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Christianity was the last great religious synthesis. It is the one nearest to us. Nothing is more natural than that those who cannot rest content with intellectual analysis, while awaiting the advent of the Saint Paul of the humanitarian faith of the future, should gather up provisionally such fragmentary illustrations of this new faith as are to be found in the records of the old. Whatever form may be ultimately imposed on our vague religious aspirations by some prophet to come, who shall unite sublime depth of feeling and lofty purity of life with strong intellectual grasp and the gift of a noble eloquence, we may at least be sure of this, that it will stand as closely related to Christianity as Christianity stood closely related to the old Judaic dispensation.

In 1885 the Agnostic Annual reported that a movement was afoot to found an agnostic temple. "The first attempt at organisation on avowedly Agnostic principles is about to be made in the South of London," the journal announced, "where several gentlemen are endeavouring to establish what they purpose [sic] calling THE AGNOSTIC TEMPLE. The object of the organisation will be to disseminate a knowledge of the teachings of Agnosticism by the distribution of literature, the holding of meetings, etc." The organizers took great care to stress the refined nature of their temple, not only by maintaining a discrete distance from lower-class religious radicals, but also by offering a cultured program for regular weekly meetings consisting of music, readings, and a short address. Agnosticism could be made respectable if it were patterned after the familiar forms of Christian institutions.

The founding of an agnostic temple was only one illustration of the religious dimension in Victorian agnosticism. Traces of religious and Christian elements also can be found in agnostic musings on the
religion of the future, their views on authentic religious feelings, and their reaction to Spencer's worship of the Unknowable.

Scientific Naturalism, Social Context, and Intellectual Continuity

Frank Turner's assessment of the social significance of scientific naturalism would seem to discourage any effort by the historian to find in agnosticism important vestiges of religious or Christian beliefs. If the agnostics were committed middle-class scientific naturalists, then they, too, were caught up in the war against the Church as a means to undermine the intellectual authority of the old order. Any form of compromise by scientific naturalists yearning for the old faith would appear to be nothing short of traitorous.

But whereas the emphasis is on change in Turner's analysis of the shift of authority from one intelligentsia to another, Robert Young stresses the line of continuity running from natural theology to scientific naturalism. Despite Turner and Young's agreement that scientific and religious beliefs must be viewed in relation to the social context, they have presented two seemingly opposed interpretations of the ideological ramifications of scientific naturalism. Young's neo-Marxist approach is a fuller development of hints thrown out by Engels and Lenin. "Agnosticism," Engels sarcastically remarked, "though not yet [after 1851] considered 'the thing' quite as much as the Church of England, is yet very nearly on a par, as far as respectability goes, with Baptism, and decidedly ranks above the Salvation Army." Lenin was more explicit in his attack on agnosticism as a subsection of "empirio-criticism" which was merely another form of reactionary idealism. "Behind the epistemological scholasticism of empirio-criticism," Lenin declared, "one must not fail to see the struggle of parties in philosophy, a struggle which in the last analysis reflects the tendencies and ideology of the antagonistic classes in modern society."

Agreeing with Lenin and Engels that an examination of the social implications of agnosticism reveals their conservatism, Young has argued that the scientific naturalists and Christian theologians were merely fighting over the "best ways of rationalizing the same set of assumptions about the existing order. An explicitly theological theodicy was being challenged by a secular one based on biological conceptions and the fundamental assumption of the uniformity of nature." Although scientific naturalists rejected the usual theological justification for the status quo, they still attempted to reconcile people to the existing social order by conceiving of society as an organism that should be
allowed to develop on its own accord since it is slowly progressing and growing due to the irresistible movement of natural laws.

A stress on continuity confronts historians with a number of striking images that invert our usual manner of perceiving key events in Victorian intellectual history. The spectacle provided by the meetings of the Metaphysical Society is not symbolic of the clash of science and religion. From the point of view of emphasizing continuity in Victorian thought, the Metaphysical Society is bourgeois society in miniature and represents squabbles from within the ruling classes on how best to rationalize bourgeois values. The famous debate between Huxley and Samuel Wilberforce during a British Association meeting at Oxford in 1860 does not encapsulate the conflict between evolution and Christianity. Rather, the significance of the debate lies in Huxley's appeal to the evangelical value of speaking truthfully in his response to Wilberforce. Halévy put forward the thesis in 1913 that, of all the countries of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, England was the freest from revolutions and violent crises because of the pervasive influence of the evangelical movement. But Christian evangelicalism was not nearly so strong and vital by the mid-century despite repeated periods of revival and renewal. "Soapy" Sam Wilberforce was a pale evangelical imitation of his father, William, the great force behind the Clapham Sect. Yet England's unique stability lasted well into the century and beyond, and Young has offered us an intriguing explanation as to why. Science becomes the new evangelicalism and purveyor of the evangelical values of seriousness and duty which help England avoid violent upheaval during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The agnostics were nearly all raised as evangelicals, and they carried some of the attitudes of evangelicalism with them into their later lives. William Wilberforce's son passed on the mantle of evangelicalism to Huxley during their debate in 1860.

The relatively conservative quality of scientific naturalism can be illustrated by briefly comparing it to the ideology of a group of middle-class scientists in another European country. The idea of science that the German scientific materialists developed was shaped by the social and political turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s. The failure to achieve a unified Germany ruled by a popularly elected parliament left liberals like Vogt, Moleschott, and Büchner with little outlet for their ambition to participate in major political decisions, and their writings were an attack not only on religious but also political authority. Although they did not advocate the use of force in order to gain political advantage, the political consequences they drew from their scientific materialism were radical enough to deserve attention from the authorities. Vogt, a constant target of police harassment, fled Germany when
the rump of the National Assembly, to which he had been elected, was forcibly dissolved by Prussian troops in 1849. He lived out his days as professor of geology and paleontology at Geneva. Political pressure led Moleschott to leave Germany for Zurich in 1856, and after years of wandering he found a new homeland in Italy, where he died in 1893.

Turner and Young have supplied us with two approaches to scientific naturalism, and therefore agnosticism, which seem, at first glance, to be contradictory. Where Turner emphasizes the notion that scientific naturalism was a substitute or replacement for conventional metaphysical beliefs based on Christian theology, Young looks for a basic continuity between the two ideologies. However, these two interpretive approaches need not be viewed as irreconcilable, and it is possible for historians to apply insights derived from both in order to enrich their understanding of what was a complex social, political, and intellectual process. Young discusses the continuity of ideologies based on natural theology and scientific naturalism, but he does treat them as representative of two social orders and intellectual frameworks. Turner’s interest in the sociology of intellectual change leads him to focus on how English society moved from one order to the next. He therefore dwells on Huxley’s role as an outsider during his radical, hungry youth, his fight against dogmatic Christianity, and his perception that scientific naturalists were offering a new leadership that would inculcate a modern set of values derived from the “new Nature.” Young, on the other hand, centers on the more mature Huxley, no longer an outsider but now a member of the “establishment.” As a body of doctrine designed to provide middle-class scientists with an air of authority, scientific naturalism proved to be extremely successful. This is the Huxley who was a fellow of Eton, who received a Civil List pension, who was consulted by Lord Salisbury, then Conservative premier, about scientific policy and appointments, and whose lean and hungry look had become replaced by a stoutness tending toward corpulence. This Huxley no longer shocked the Victorian public, and having won his battles he could admit to his strong religious nature.

_Pope Huxley and Original Christianity_

Although the agnostics borrowed from Mansel, the Kantian tradition, and fideism in order to attack the authority of the Church, the stress on the limits of human knowledge and God’s corresponding unknowableness represented only one element of Christian thought which the agnostics retained in their views on religion, ethics, and science. The agnostics all came from Christian households, and they shared many of the values espoused by Victorian Christians. Many of the agnostics re-
vered the Bible as a reservoir of spiritual truth. Although they experienced a moral revulsion to those Christian doctrines most readily identified with evangelicalism, they still retained an evangelical fervor for sincerity, honesty, and moral earnestness. The agnostics all lived model lives of respectability. Frederick Pollock once remarked that there was "enough goodness in Huxley to make all England Christian, if it could only be parcelled out and distributed around." However, it is easy to dismiss these vestiges of Christianity in the agnostic mentality as being of little consequence. Christian doctrine, Blyton argues, was thrown overboard by the agnostics, and a secularized version of Christian ethics was retained. The agnostic use of biblical language and ideas can be interpreted as a purely polemical strategy since prose shaped by biblical style and rich with allusions drawn from Holy Scripture had a powerful effect on the Victorian public.

One author has dubbed Spencer, Darwin, Tyndall, and Huxley as the "four Evangelists" of agnosticism. In a similar vein Clifford has been called "an apostle of scientific thought," Stephen a "Hebrew prophet" and Tyndall the "Apostle of Physical Science." Huxley's missionary spirit has also been noticed. He has been described as the "great apostle of the modern gospel of science," "the John Knox of Agnosticism," "prelate," "priest," and "prophet of science," whose lay sermons presented a "Creed of Science for its Thirty-nine Articles." But such satirical references to the agnostics are more often than not meant to indicate that their manner or method of disseminating the good news of modern science resembled the Christian preaching of the gospel. There is rarely a serious intent to imply that the agnostics preserved any substantial religious content from Christianity.

In the heat of controversy Huxley tended to preach his message dogmatically, which led Hutton to playfully name him "Pope Huxley." Huxley, Hutton maintained, responded to criticism "in the tone of a Papal bull,—containing violent censures . . . as well as dogmatic decrees." Hutton chided Huxley for being untrue to the agnostic attitude of suspended judgment in the face of lack of evidence. Although Hutton joked about Huxley's affinities with the very theologians he attacked, he did not allow his sense of irony to obscure the important debt the agnostics owed to Christianity and the vital religious content of their thought. When Huxley talked of his deep religious sensibility in his essays, Hutton, rather than claim that the agnostic was merely offering a sop to public opinion, took Huxley's religiousness seriously. Hutton sensed an ambivalence in Huxley toward religion. "In our belief," Hutton declared, "Professor Huxley had a half-unconscious craving, to which he thought it wrong to give way, for that passionate faith which he said that he desired to undermine in all cases in which there
was, in his opinion, no possibility of what he termed verification. Indeed, his heart often rose up in insurrection against his scientific genius, and compelled him to feel what was entirely inconsistent with the logic of his thoughts."

Another contemporary of Huxley's who agreed with Hutton's estimate was Wilfrid Ward (1856-1916), a Catholic and later editor of the *Dublin Review*. Ward was Huxley's neighbor at Eastbourne. Throughout the last years of Huxley's life, the two men had intimate talks devoted entirely to religious issues, and during these, Ward was surprised to learn of the agnostic's devout nature. Ward interpreted Huxley as one who was torn between the destructive quality of the theoretical conclusions he drew from his agnosticism and his practical attitudes that drove him toward theism. "I concur with those who believe that his rooted faith in ethical ideals," Ward asserted, "which he confessed himself unable to account for by the known laws of evolution, implied a latent recognition of the claims of religious mystery as more imperative and important than he could explicitly admit on his own agnostic principles. Careful students of his writings are aware how far more he left standing of Christian faith, even in his explicit theories, than was popularly supposed; and this knowledge appeared more and not less significant to some of those who conversed with him on these questions." It was Ward's opinion that Huxley's combativeness was a result of the bitterness he still felt when he remembered the intolerance he experienced as a youthful scientist fighting every inch of the way against bigoted theologians. In those days, Huxley once told a friend, "men like Lyell and Murchison were not considered fit to lick the dust off the boots of a curate. I should like to get my heel into their mouths and scr-r-unch it round." But beneath the smoldering animosity toward ecclesiasticism in Huxley's later years, Ward could still detect an intensely religious soul. In many ways Huxley was representative of the majority of the agnostics.

The agnostics revealed their religious nature even when they were attacking the Christianity of their time. The basis of their criticism of the rigid dogmatism of the churches was their belief that Victorian Christianity was a perversion of the original, pure religion as founded by Christ. "The Church founded by Jesus," Huxley wrote in a letter of 1889, "has not made its way; has not permeated the world—but did become extinct in the country of its birth." Huxley, like many of the other agnostics, genuinely revered Christ and his teachings. According to Hutton, Huxley frequently indulged in sudden bursts of passionate feeling for Christ. Tyndall also saw in Christ an attractive symbol of true religious ideals in contrast to the degenerate state of present day Christianity. He wrote in 1848 that "the Great Spirit which from time
to time expresses himself audibly among the sons of men dwells far below the scum of sects—into this shall methodism, churchism and many other isms one day sink and a purer lovelier and more practical faith—a faith which Jesus taught and John understood shall bend with benignant influence over our altered world." Stephen put forward a similar idea. The ancient creeds, he asserted, "were indeed in great part the work of the best and ablest of our forefathers; they therefore provide some expression for the highest emotions of which our nature is capable." 18

Even Clifford, who frequently indulged in savage attacks on Christian orthodoxy which outdid all of the other agnostics in their ferocity, shared with Tyndall, Huxley, and Stephen a high regard for the original spirit of Christianity. When Clifford was wasting away in 1878 of the consumption that would claim his life a year later, he could still summon the strength and wit to answer to a newspaper report that he was converting back to Christianity. Flatly contradicting the story he stated that his "M.D. had certified he was ill, but 'twas not mental derangement." 19 Clifford saw Christianity as an idolatrous religion, barely distinguishable from the pagan abominations condemned in the Bible (LE 1:252). In 1869 he satirized ceremonies to install a new bishop. "The entire town is in an uproar for the ecclesiastical fuss that is to take two hours in the streets and the cathedral tomorrow," Clifford wrote, "enthronization of the new bishop, parade through the public ways of him and minor fetishes, as the mace, cocked hat, and Sword of the Civic Functionary, and subsequent grand banquet to the priests of Baal." 20 Clifford likened present-day Christian practice to forms of worship found in ancient Egypt. The Church developed a creed very different in substance from Christ's message, and in his essay "The Ethics of Religion" Clifford had only praise for the Sermon on the Mount. "The gospel indeed came out of Judaea," Clifford affirmed, "but the Church and her dogmas came out of Egypt" (LE 2:230).

The fount of the original spirit of Christianity, the Bible, was regarded by the agnostics as a book of great wisdom and beauty. In his attacks on the doctrine of scriptural infallibility Huxley was combating what he conceived to be a tendency to erect the Bible into an idol that destroyed the deep richness he earnestly desired to preserve. He praised the Bible for its simple honesty, its "moral beauty and grandeur," and even its scientific methodology. "As to the methods by which the Biblical writers arrived at their great truths," he wrote, "I do believe that they were in the truest and highest sense scientific. I recognize in their truths the results of a long and loving, if sorrowful, study of man's nature and relations." But although the Bible followed sound inductive principles, it never claimed for itself scientific authority. 21 Tyndall,
who knew the Bible by heart as a boy, also revered the Bible, and consi­
dered "the purity of the Scriptures one of the highest proofs of their
divine origin."

The agnostics agreed that the Bible, if read without prejudice, was
the best antidote to bibliolatry. Huxley argued that "the Bible contains
within itself the refutation of nine-tenths of the mixture of sophistical
metaphysics and old-world superstition which has been piled around it
by the so-called Christians of later times" (SCT, 268). Huxley dis­
tressed some of his freethinking friends during his tenure as member of
the London School Board in the early seventies, for he sided with those
who believed that the Bible might be read in the public schools. But
when Stephen heard of it he responded, "What made us freethinkers?
Why, reading the Bible!"

The Bible itself was a revolutionary book.

The agnostics did not believe that the answer to the disintegration
of original Christianity was to work within the system and preserve it
through modernization. The liberal Christian attempt to update the
Church was doomed to failure because the Christian religion had sunk
too low to be revived. The distortions of Christ's teachings had,
through the ages, become too ingrained in the heart of the Church to be
removed piecemeal. Stephen argued that the belief in hell was part of
the "very structure of Christianity" and therefore could not be arbi­
trarily excised. "The whole must require to be remodelled," Stephen
insisted. "We cannot retain the amiable parts of a doctrine whilst leav­
ing out the sterner elements, or be sure that we can clip and mangle
without emasculating" (AA, 105). Whether we read carefully Tyndall's
attack on the supposed efficacy of prayer, or Stephen's repudiation of
the notion of hell, or Clifford's disgust with the doctrines of original sin
and vicarious sacrifice, the same theme emerges: the agnostic belief
that Christianity had become vulgar, immoral, and hopelessly foreign
to the true religious spirit of pure Christianity.

The New Reformation

Attacks on dogmatic Christianity gave the writings of the agnostics an
unavoidably destructive quality. However, although the agnostics
viewed their critical efforts as necessary, they did not fancy themselves
to be mere nihilists. They saw their negative comments as a needed
preliminary to a positive attempt to construct a new religion. Tyndall
wrote to Spottiswoode in 1877 that "my desire has been to act the part
of a conservative rather than that of a Destructive, by gradually prepar­
ing the public mind for inevitable changes which without this prepara­
tion might take a revolutionary form." Wilfrid Ward noticed that Hux­
ley "resented being identified with simple destruction in matters of
religious faith." In 1892 Huxley referred to the aphorism by Cuvier, prefixed to the prologue of Controverted Questions, which stated "one should clear the ground before beginning to build." Huxley affirmed that this aphorism represented both the positive and negative quality of his purpose during the last thirty years. "It will be observed," Huxley went on, "that it enjoins the clearing of the ground, not in a spirit of wanton mischief, not for destruction’s sake, but with the distinct purpose of fitting the site for those constructive operations which must be the ultimate object of every rational man. Neither one lifetime, nor two, nor half a dozen, will suffice to clear away the astonishing tangle of inherited mythology." 25

As constructors of a new religion, the agnostics, in particular Tyndall and Huxley, perceived themselves to be religious reformers like Luther. Huxley believed that the revolution effected in the modern mind by the beneficial impact of science represented the final climax of the Protestant Reformation. "The act which commenced with the Protestant Reformation is nearly played out, and a wider and deeper change than that effected three centuries ago . . . is waiting to come on." Just as Luther had contrasted free thought to traditional authority in order to undermine the strength of the decaying Catholic Church, Huxley saw a new movement at work which insisted "on reopening all questions and asking all institutions, however venerable, by what right they exist, and whether they are, or are not, in harmony with the real or supposed wants of mankind" (SE, 191–92). In the preface to Science and Christian Tradition Huxley referred to this revolution, which embodied the spirit of intellectual freedom born of science, as the "New Reformation" (vi).

Huxley and Tyndall were quite fond of drawing a comparison between their efforts to bring about a new reformation and the beginnings of Protestantism. In 1849, taking advantage of some free time while he studied at Marburg, Tyndall went, as he put it, on "a pilgrimage to the scenes of Luther's life." He reported to Hirst that he went to Eisenbach to see the room where "Luther flung the inkbottle at the devil," and then traveled to Wittenberg to see Luther's grave, his house, and old furniture. 26 In 1874, when Tyndall was at the height of his career and was about to deliver his notorious "Belfast Address" as the incoming president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, he drew a parallel between the opposition he anticipated from bigoted Christians and that which Luther encountered from dogmatic Catholics. "I will go to Belfast as Luther did to Worms if necessary," Tyndall wrote, "and meet if requisite all the Devils in Hell there." 27 In support of his attack on the rigid emphasis by Victorian Christians on custom and ritual, in particular in the case of the observance of the sabbath,
Tyndall quoted from Luther and Melanchthon to demonstrate that "the early reformers emphatically asserted the freedom of Christians from Sabbatical bonds" [NF, 16].

Huxley also felt a sympathetic bond between himself and Luther. In 1847, while on his Rattlesnake voyage, Huxley discussed his religious doubts and difficulties as if they were, like Luther's position at Worms on the sins of Catholicism, the result of honest and sincere reflection. Huxley wrote in his journal, "Ich kann nicht anders! Gott hilfe mir!" But later, in "Agnosticism: A Rejoinder" (1889) Huxley found in Luther a vindication for his agnostic proclivities as well. He claimed that he had reached his agnostic standpoint through the exercise of his private judgment. "My position is really no more than that of an expositor," Huxley declared, "and my justification for undertaking it is simply that conviction of the supremacy of private judgment . . . which is the foundation of the Protestant Reformation." 28

The new reformation could involve the founding of new, pure institutions to replace the corrupt churches of the day. Huxley was quite serious in 1871 when he talked of the possibility of "the existence of an Established Church which should be a blessing to the community. A Church in which, week by week, services should be devoted, not to the iteration of abstract propositions in theology, but to the setting before men's minds of an ideal of true, just, and pure living. . . . Depend upon it, if such a Church existed, no one would seek to disestablish it." 29

Stephen was attracted to the founding of a Church which would be based on aesthetic principles, and he claimed that such an institution was the only hope for those who desired a truly catholic religion. He affirmed that "a dogma is only offensive when you are asked to believe it; but we may be all members of a Church in which a dogma is no more essential than a vestment, and is simply an arbitrary sign of certain emotions. Indeed, by this method we may reach a catholicism wider than has ever yet dawned upon the imagination of mankind" (FP, 56).

The Religion of the Future

The agnostics were not trying to destroy all forms of religion when they launched their onslaught on Christianity. The new reformation represented for Huxley the building of a new religion that would recover what had been lost by Christianity when it perverted the pure ideals of its founder. The agnostic faith in the continuing validity of some type of religion can also be perceived in their musings on the future of religion. An aphorism scribbled by Huxley in 1894 states that "the religion which will endure is such a day dream as may still be dreamed in the noon tide glare of science." Likewise, Tyndall talked confidently of the
survival of religion. Since religion was "ingrained in the nature of man" it would be reconstructed, as it has been many times in the past. But Tyndall could not foresee the precise form it would take.\textsuperscript{30}

Of all the agnostics it was Stephen who devoted the most energy to the subject of the religion of the future. The religious instincts of human beings, Stephen believed, were indestructible, and therefore they would persist if the Anglican Church, or even Christianity perished (\textit{FP}. 7). But the nineteenth century was an age of change, caught awkwardly between lingering, ancient forms of faith, and the yet to be born religion of the future. "The old creed," Stephen stated, "elaborated by many generations, and consecrated to our imaginations by a vast wealth of associations, is adapted in a thousand ways to the wants of its believers. The new creed—whatever may be its ultimate form—has not been thus formulated and hallowed to our minds" (\textit{FP}. 359). Stephen saw the problem as being manifested in a painful discord between the imagination, which was essentially conservative in nature due to its attraction to the old symbols and dreams, and reason, which was progressive in its construction of a new order with the aid of science. The new order did not appeal to the imagination but remained "colourless and uninteresting, because the old associations have not yet gathered round it." Its only resort was an "appeal to its utilitarian triumphs in order to gain allies against the ancient idolatry" (\textit{HETEC} 1:14–17).

In his endeavor to understand the difficulty of constructing a new faith Stephen turned to a study of the past. Stephen's \textit{History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century} had two objectives. First, by rescuing the old deists from oblivion, Stephen hoped to demonstrate that orthodoxy already had been bested intellectually by eighteenth-century unbelievers. Second, Stephen wished to comprehend why evangelicalism, rather than the superior position of rationalists, had captured the minds and imaginations of the bulk of the English people in the last century. Stephen attempted to uncover the cause of the failure of eighteenth-century rationalism in England in the hope of avoiding a similar failure in his own day.\textsuperscript{31}

Stephen also learned what to expect in the future from his study of Christianity. Here was an intellectual movement that had succeeded where the deists had failed. Since he was dealing with a far longer stretch of time in this case in comparison to his work on the eighteenth century, Stephen found more scope for the application of evolutionary theory. He viewed the entire history of religion as subject to the process of natural selection. Christianity had won the struggle for existence among religions not because of some claim to perfect truth, but because it suited the conditions of the time and the needs of the society in which it originated.\textsuperscript{32} "We can only explain the
spread of the organism by showing how and why the soil was congenial,” Stephen exclaimed. “The Christian doctrine obviously spread, as every doctrine spreads, just so far as it was adapted to men at a given stage” (AA, 312). Christianity was successful because countless multitudes found in it what they wanted, not because of the personal characteristics of its founders. It was not only appealing to the imagination of the populace, but it was vague and open-ended enough to attract the higher intellects, who erected an elaborate theological structure that satisfied their reason. Just as explicable on the basis of evolutionary theory was the decline of Christianity. A result of a particular set of social conditions, Christianity's remedy was no longer appropriate to modern needs. The excessive transcendental element of Christian thought, which in the beginning gave free play to popular imagination and the reason of the intellects of the time, later became a source of decay.

Stephen believed that with the decline of Christianity and the corresponding vacuum that now existed, the situation resembled the period preceding the birth of Christianity (AA, 353). But the question still remained, who would win the struggle for existence today as the Christians had centuries ago? Stephen asked, “What sect is analogous to the ancient Christians? Who are the Christians of the present day? Which, in all the huddle of conflicting creeds, is the one which is destined to emerge in triumph?” (AA, 354–55). Stephen did not profess to know the answer. He believed that “the problem about the religion of the future is simply insoluble. Inspired prophecy is out of date” (AA, 342). However, from his examination of the evolution of religion, the origins of Christianity, and eighteenth-century deism, he could conclude that the new religion would be a higher one in that it would satisfy modern reason and imagination in a more sophisticated manner than had Christianity (AA, 301).

Stephen saw his role in this evolutionary process as a modest one. At most the agnostic could contribute to laying a philosophical basis of a new religion. It would be premature, in his opinion, to propagate a fully developed religion. “We are only laying the foundations of the temple,” Stephen declared, “and know not what will be the glories of the completed edifice” (FP, 360). But Stephen wanted to help shape the process that was giving birth to the religion of the future. He warned that agnostics must not only attack Christian dogmatism, but also become aware of the power of the Church's appeal to the imagination, which is achieved through an elevating morality, aesthetically pleasant forms of worship, and the attraction of a strong social bond. Stephen believed that it was important to “recognize what is good in the feelings to which the Church owes its strength, and show how they may be
combined with full acceptance of the teachings of reason.” The agnostic, if he wished to succeed in building a new religion, was charged with the duty of speaking the truth in order to provide “new channels for the utterance of our emotions.” Plainspeaking was the path to a new set of symbols attractive to the imagination and yet based on the advances of reason. Stephen affirmed that “the more we really believe that religion is founded upon enduring instincts which will find an expression in one form or another, the less anxious we should be to retain the old formulae, and the more confident that by saying what we think, in the plainest possible language, we shall be really taking the shortest road to discovering the new doctrines which will satisfy at once our reason and our imagination.”

The Religion of Agnosticism

Huxley vehemently denied that agnosticism could be described as a “creed” and claimed that agnosticism had nothing to do with religion. However, Huxley, Tyndall, Stephen, and Clifford all put forward their views on the nature of true religion, and they saw them as consistent with their agnostic principles. Their work contained a positive, constructive dimension that is often buried under their explosive attacks on Christian orthodoxy. Up to this point we have discussed their call for a new religion and their vision of a religion of the future. Now we must turn to the actual content of their religious thought.

Stephen, Clifford, Huxley, and Tyndall all believed that religion fell within the realm of feeling, emotion, imagination, inwardness, and symbol. In acting as an outlet for our inner feelings, religion was akin to art and poetry. The religious instinct, inherent in human beings, was a living, growing thing both within the individual and in the race.

Huxley’s lifelong interest in religion is illustrated by his preoccupation with religious themes in his published works as well as in his unrealized plans for a comprehensive history of Christianity based on a long and serious study of theology. This fascination with religion was the result of Huxley’s own strong religious sensibility. In 1873 he answered Galton’s request for information on his character by noting his “profound religious tendency capable of fanaticism, but tempered by no less profound theological scepticism.” The source of Huxley’s religiousness was an awareness of an impenetrable mystery that evoked a religious response in all of humanity. Hovering over the “abyss of the unknown and unknowable,” human beings were but dimly graced with insight into the world. “But in this sadness,” Huxley believed, “this consciousness of the limitation of man, this sense of an open se-
cret which he cannot penetrate, lies the essence of all religion; and the
test to embody it in the forms furnished by the intellect is the origin of the higher theologies" [MR, 33].

In addition to seeing religion as a proper manifestation of that
"sense of an open secret," Huxley emphasized the moral dimension of
religiosity. Religion involved "the reverence and love for the ethical
ideal, and the desire to realise that ideal in life." Huxley's vehement
statement that "religious feeling" is "the essential basis of conduct" is
more readily explicable in light of his view of the link between religion
and morality.37

Huxley never systematically outlined the content of his religious
feelings. These matters were better left unsaid unless the agnostic was
to become as dogmatic as the orthodox. However, Huxley hinted at his
general position. In a letter to Romanes in 1892 he wrote: "I have a
great respect for the Nazarenism of Jesus—very little for later 'Chris­tianity.' But the only religion that appeals to me is prophetic Judaism.
Add to it something from the best Stoics and something from Spinoza
and something from Goethe, and there is a religion for men" (LLTHH
2:361).

In his eagerness to leave no place for religion in agnosticism, Benn
pointed to Leslie Stephen as the best example of a consistent antireligi­ous agnostic.38 However, Stephen repeatedly affirmed his belief in the
value of religion. Of all the agnostics Stephen was the most careful to
identify religion almost entirely with ethics and aesthetics.39 Religion's
role was to express moral sentiments in a beauteous fashion and
thereby to inspire the individual to greater ethical heights. Religion, to
Stephen, must become "the embodiment in concrete images of the
spiritual aspirations of mankind" and must be built upon "a purely aes­thetich basis" [FP, 55–56]. Stephen believed that feelings, especially reli­gious ones, were best voiced through the medium of poetry.

In Stephen's view Christianity was poetic in substance. But in­stead of treating religion as symbolic of elevated feelings and ideals,
Christianity tended to equate religious doctrine with literal truth. As a
result, at the heart of orthodox Christianity there lay an unpoeitic mate­rialism that offered homage to grossly material symbols; orthodox
Christianity crudely interpreted the articles of its creed in physical
terms. Compared to the supposedly materialistic scientists, Christian­ity was far worse. There is more materialism, Stephen declared, "in
popular sentimentalisms about the 'blood of Jesus' than in all the writ­ings of the profane men of science." Stephen's advice to Christianity
was to admit that its truth was poetic or symbolic, not literal or scien­tific. If the Church were willing to treat its truths as beautiful legends
and imaginative ideas, then a reconciliation between faith and reason
could be found which would protect the divine from the sceptic, because the demand for proof would no longer be relevant.\textsuperscript{40}

Clifford also could be surprisingly eloquent on those rare occasions when he addressed the topic of authentic religion. Pointing to Maurice, Kingsley, and Martineau as examples of Christians who put forward “forms of religious emotion which do not thus undermine the conscience,” Clifford retained a place for religion in his agnosticism. He referred to religious feeling as “cosmic emotion,” by which he meant a sense of awe in regard to the order manifested throughout the universe (\textit{LE} 2:242, 253–85).

Tyndall was enthralled by the religious aspect of idealism which he found in Carlyle, Emerson, Fichte, and German philosophy. As a result, Tyndall constantly stressed the need for a vital commitment of one’s whole being to religion, and he pointed out the error of identifying religion with intellectual persuasion. Tyndall declared that “religion is not a persuasion, it is a life,” that “it must come from the heart,” and that religion “finds a root in human nature which is deeper than all sensuous experience and lies below our modern science of logic.”\textsuperscript{41}

To Tyndall it was this personal religious experience in the individual which was significant and not the attempt to fossilize heartfelt religion into specific forms. During a discussion with Hirst at Queenwood in 1852 Tyndall used the image of stick and vine to represent his view on the relationship between form and religion. “Forms bear the same relation to vital religion as the stick does to the vine which it supports—the life is in the vine, but had it not the support to cling to it might grovel on the ground and its fruit be spoilt. But just as there are vines which spring up by the rock itself and cling thereto needing no stick, so there are men whose religion needs no stereotyped form.” Five years later Tyndall wrote in his journal that he surprised two pious Americans “for I could talk to them of religious experience which went nearly to the bottom of theirs, and at the same time seemed to regard their forms, which they deemed essential, very lightly. Indeed what I would call a form, for example Christianity itself, they deemed the essential marrow of the thing.”\textsuperscript{42} Religion could not be frozen into a specific form because, by its very nature, it was a living, growing spirit. Religious emotion, ordinarily a valid form of human experience, became a falsity when formalized into statements about objective reality.

Tyndall found that many of his contemporaries were unwilling to accept his view of religion. In 1879 he referred to “the religion which Mr. Huxley and myself favour” and attacked those like Mivart who were so narrow-minded that they were unable to understand either his religion or “the religion of a Fichte, of an Emerson, or of a Carlyle.”\textsuperscript{43} In
order to defend the validity of his conception of religion Tyndall compared the "rigid" religious symbols "of our present christianity" to Christ's attempt to "infuse a spirit into a world which has lost its way in a labyrinth of Formulas. He contended for an inner, vital, warming principle, which should be the spring of action to humanity." Tyndall pictured Christ as one who broke the Hebrew sabbath deliberately as a defiant gesture against those who suffocated religion under a load of formulas, forms, and ceremonies. (NF, 11–12).

Tyndall believed that the appropriate mode for expressing religious sentiment was poetry (PS 2:196). He foresaw an important role for the poet as the future bearer of religious culture to the world:

To him it is given for a long time to come to fill those shores which the recession of the theologic tide has left exposed. Void of offence to science, he may freely deal with conceptions which science shuns, and become the illustrator and interpreter of that Power which as 'Jehovah, Jove, or Lord,' has hitherto filled and strengthened the human heart. (PS 2:99)

Turning once again to the original Christians in order to make his point, Tyndall argued that both Saint John and Christ used poetry to articulate religious truth (PS 2:357).

Theology, Science, and Religion

Whereas religion, along with poetry and art, belonged to the province of feeling, the agnostics placed theology in the realm of intellect or reason. The propositions of theology could therefore be tested like any other proposition in the realm of intellect. Theology must submit itself to the authority of science. Furthermore, on the basis of the distinction between religion and theology, the agnostics could claim that there was only a potential conflict between theology and science, not religion and science.

For Huxley, religion belonged to the realm of feeling, while science was part of the realm of intellect. Science and religion, if rightly conceived, could never come into conflict because each realm was distinct and without authority outside its proper sphere of interest. Huxley affirmed in 1859 that "true science and true religion are twin-sisters, and the separation of either from the other is sure to provide the death of both. Science prospers exactly in proportion as it is religious; and religion flourishes in exact proportion to the scientific depth and firmness of its basis." However, theology, distinct from religion and operating in the world of intellect because of its claim to embody feelings in concrete facts, was potentially in conflict with science. Science and reli-
The origins of agnosticism were only at odds if religion was wrongly identified with theology. The real war was between agnosticism and ecclesiasticism ("the championship of a foregone conclusion as to the truth of a particular form of Theology"), and, parallel to this antagonism, between science and theology (SCT, 312). Huxley found the distinction between religious feeling and theological dogma in Carlyle and in German thinkers such as Goethe, to whom his reading of Carlyle had led him. "Sartor Resartus led me to know," Huxley wrote privately to Kingsley in 1860, "that a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology" (LLTHH 1:237).

Huxley first put forward his view of the distinction between religion and theology in an anonymous editorial in the Reader in 1864 titled "Science and 'Church Policy.'" "Religion has her unshakeable throne in those deeps of man's nature which lie around and below the intellect, but not in it. But Theology," Huxley declared, "is a simple branch of Science or it is nought; and the 'Church Policy' which sets it up against Science is about as reasonable as would be the advocacy of the claims of the rule of three to superior authority over arithmetic in general." Twenty-one years later he was still claiming that there was no conflict between science and religion. "The antagonism between science and religion," Huxley announced, "about which we hear so much, appears to me to be purely factitious—fabricated, on the one hand, by short-sighted religious people who confound a certain branch of science, theology, with religion; and, on the other, by equally short-sighted scientific people who forget that science takes for its province only that which is susceptible of clear intellectual comprehension; and that, outside the boundaries of that province, they must be content with imagination, with hope, and with ignorance" (SHT, 160-61).

Stephen agreed with Huxley that the "conflict was between science and theology" (FP, 58). He, too, separated the emotional sources of a valid religion, and the questionable legitimacy of Christian theology. Tyndall presented the crucial difference between religion and theology by using a number of vivid contrasts. Against a religion based on emotion, the heart, and feeling, Tyndall juxtaposed a religion "founded upon logic," "the religion of the head," and "the religion of the understanding." Whereas the former represented authentic religion, the latter was in reality theology unjustly claiming to be religion. Inner faith was the kernel of religious value within the forms built by theology. Furthermore, Tyndall was not slow to test the worth of orthodox theological doctrine against the superior structure of science. "Science," Tyndall declared, "which is the logic of nature, demands proportion between the house and its foundation. Theology sometimes builds weighty structures on a doubtful base" (NF, 13).
The other agnostics also followed Huxley in linking their separation of religion from theology to an affirmation of the basic compatibility between science and religion. Clifford was unsparing in his criticism of Christian theology but treated the true religion of people like Maurice, as well as the religious feeling engendered by cosmic emotion, with tenderness. In a discussion of the conflict between science and theology, Stephen sought a “reconciliation” between science and religion founded on “some deeper principle.” He argued that “the sacred images must be once and for all carried fairly beyond the reach of the spreading conflagration, not moved back step by step, suffering fresh shocks at every fresh operation. The radical remedy would be to convey them at once into the unassailable ground of the imagination” ([FP, 50]).

Tyndall likewise believed that science and religion could exist in peaceful harmony. Subjective religious feeling, “as true as any other part of human consciousness,” was safe from scientific attack. But any attempt to objectivize emotions, to thrust poetic conceptions into “the region of facts and knowledge,” is met by science with hostility. Tyndall pointed out that science therefore makes war only on the scenery, not the substance, of religion. “Let that scenery be taken for what it is worth,” Tyndall announced, “as an effort on the part of man to name what by him is unnameable, to express what by him is inexpressible, to bring in short the mystery of life and its surroundings within the range of his capacities, let it be accepted as a symbol instead of asserted as a fact—a temporary rendering in the terms of knowledge of that which transcends all knowledge—and nine-tenths of the ‘conflict between science and religion’ would cease.” 49 Religion, in its subjective dimension and in its articulation through symbol, could be reconciled with the objective facts of science.

Science, according to Tyndall, need not trespass on the sacred mysteries jealously guarded by religion. By talking of nature through the language of science, or in terms of matter, motion, and force, the scientist merely pushed “the mystery back a little” but never plumbed its depths. In fact, Tyndall saw science as being in need of the spiritual sustenance afforded by religion. In his journal he wrote in 1854 that “there are principles in the human heart that cannot be roused by science—principles upon which the culture of science and all other duties depend.” 50

The agnostics, then, saw themselves attacking certain theological doctrines in the interests of religion itself, as well as science. 51 Moore has labored long and hard to demonstrate that, although Huxley used the military metaphor quite frequently, he should not be considered as typical. 52 Moore’s estimation of Huxley is faulty, but the view here
urged actually reinforces the major thrust of Moore's book, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*. Those sections in Huxley's work which are often quoted to support the thesis that a state of war existed between science and religion in Victorian England are only examples of Huxley's perception of the antagonism between science and false theology. But Huxley's belief in the genuine harmony of science and religion, rightly conceived, marks him out as typical of the agnostics and the age, and reveals the inadequacy of military historiography.

The tendency to look upon Huxley as the leader of an army of agnostic scientists bent on destroying religion in an inevitable war, and then to proclaim science as the winner, can be undermined if we summarize the paradoxes of this approach in the following manner. The agnostics won the battle in the sense that they de-deified the study of nature, and that is how we do science today. But they just as certainly lost the war in that the agnostics were unable to convince us that they had preserved an authentic religion. We are more likely to pay heed to orthodox Christians such as Wace and Marxist thinkers like Lenin, who claim that the agnostics bore an animosity to religion.

*Agnostic Theology and Reactions to Spencer’s Unknowable*

Although the agnostics tended to champion the cause of true religion and authentic science against the evil influence of Christian theology, they nevertheless believed that a theology of some sort would be acceptable if it met the requirements of science. Huxley was positive that modern science had acted as a beneficial influence in purifying theology and hence religion as well. "If the religion of the present differs from that of the past," Huxley declared, "it is because the theology of the present has become more scientific than that of the past; because it has not only renounced idols of wood and idols of stone, but begins to see the necessity of breaking in pieces the idols built up of books and traditions and fine-spun ecclesiastical cobwebs" (*MR*, 38). A scientific theology was considered to be a legitimate possibility. However, the agnostics reached different conclusions on what survived when theology was submitted to the tests of science. Their disagreement on the content of a valid scientific theology is nowhere more evident than in their varied evaluations of Spencer's Unknowable.

The agnostics were happy to use Spencer's notion of God's unknowableness based on Mansel's antinomies to illustrate the impotence of reason in the realm of religious ideas. They disagreed with Mill's contention that Mansel's assault on intuitive knowledge of God was fallacious, and they followed Spencer in adapting Mansel's approach to their own ends. However, Spencer's theology of the Unknow-
able did not gain the complete approval of all the agnostics, and some adopted a position that suspended judgment on the existence of God.

In the area of theology there were a variety of shades of opinion. Huxley himself explained why this was so. "The results of the working out of the agnostic principle will vary according to individual knowledge and capacity, and according to the general condition of science," Huxley affirmed. "That which is unproven today may be proven by the help of new discoveries to-morrow. The only negative fixed points will be those negations which flow from the demonstrable limitation of our faculties" (SCT, 246, 311). The sole certainties of agnosticism were derived from the demonstrated limitations of the human intellect, which bounded the thought and knowledge of all people. The infinite would eternally transcend the understanding of the finite, and the absolute was forever out of bounds to the relative. But other limits were the result of ignorance, and how far these limits extended depended on the scientific expertise of individuals, their desire to expand their knowledge, and the fund of knowledge available at that point in time. Not surprisingly, then, agnosticism was not monolithic in nature but tended to vary from individual to individual, particularly on the issue of theology.

One of the main reasons for Tyndall's high opinion of "The Unknowable" stems from his acceptance of Spencer's concept of God. In 1866 Tyndall referred to the "Unknowable God." Sprinkled throughout his published works are similar expressions that reveal his theistic leanings. He spoke of the "infinite unknown," the "Inscrutable," "the inscrutable Power . . . in whom we live and move and have our being and our end," and the "Incomprehensible." Even when Tyndall experienced religious doubts he "could by no means get rid of the idea that aspects of nature and the consciousness of man implied the operation of a power altogether beyond my grasp—an energy the thought of which raised the temperature of the mind, though it refused to accept shape, personal or otherwise, from the intellect" (FS 2:382).

Whereas Tyndall followed Spencer in vigorously affirming the existence of God, Stephen and Clifford were inclined to suspend their judgment or even tend toward atheism. Stephen did not consider himself to be a disciple of Herbert Spencer, and he rejected Spencer's concept of the Unknowable as a positive consciousness of a God behind appearances. He declared in 1886 that "the unknowable, which lies beyond, is not made into a reality by its capital letter" for to us "it is a mere blank, with which we have nothing to do" (AA, 144). Later, in his English Utilitarians, Stephen stated: "although I am an 'Agnostic' I cannot accept Mr. Spencer's version of Hamilton's doctrine." Spencer's whole project of presenting a grandiose system of philosophy was
viewed by Stephen as premature. Not mentioning Spencer by name, Stephen sarcastically proclaimed that “a man who fancies that he can dictate a complete system to the world only shows that he is arrogant to the verge of insanity.” Clifford did not subscribe to the Spencerian deity, nor did he accept any position that gave positive value to the “unreasonable or unknowable.”

Although Stephen denied that he was an atheist, his agnosticism sometimes stood slightly to the left of perfectly balanced suspension of judgment on God’s existence and nearer to denial. He admitted to Norton in a letter dated 5 March 1876 that his “An Agnostic’s Apology” was “of an atheological tendency” (LLLS, 287). Stephen believed that the essential value of the Christian faith, as presented by theologians, was retained if humanity, not God, was placed at the center of the religious and moral system (FP, 358). Similarly, Clifford, at times, sounded very Nietzschean in his proclamation of the death of God and the coming of the “kingdom of Man” (LE 2:285).

**Huxley and the Unknowable**

Huxley’s position on theology is complex, and he has often been misunderstood. Benn and Bury look to Stephen as the purest or most consistent agnostic, because his works contain no traces of the Unknowable. Both scholars tend to place Huxley with Spencer as agnostics who adulterated their thought with metaphysical overtones. However, others, for example Nielsen, turn a deaf ear to Huxley’s theistic proclivities and call him and Stephen typical agnostics while excluding Spencer from consideration. Huxley actually displayed affinities with both Stephen and Spencer, for although he attacked the idea of the Unknowable, he nevertheless revealed theistic leanings.

Huxley at first felt comfortable with Spencer’s term the Unknowable. Writing to Kingsley on 30 April 1863, he referred to “the passionless impersonality of the unknown and unknowable which science shows everywhere underlying the thin veil of phenomena.” Like Spencer, Huxley talked of the unknowable behind nature in tones of awe and reverence. Three years later, in his essay “On the Advisableness of Improving Natural Knowledge,” he mentioned worshiping “at the altar of the Unknown” (MR, 38). During that same year Huxley defended his article on “Science and ‘Church Policy,’” recently published in the Reader, in a letter to a friend. He stood by his point in the article that theology must stand or fall on its consistency with scientific method, but he asserted “without fear of refutation that there is not a word in that article opposed to any form of belief in a revelation of the Unknowable.”
Because of these indications of agreement with Spencer during the sixties, Huxley and Spencer’s views of agnosticism were routinely conflated. Even Hutton, who was fairly well informed on the ideas of the agnostics, saw Huxley’s position in 1871 as being a mere expansion on Spencer’s Unknowable. However, there are strong indications that by the end of the sixties Huxley could no longer subscribe to Spencer’s worship of the Unknowable and that one of the reasons for coining the term *agnosticism* was to distance himself from Spencer as well as Positivists, empiricists, and materialists.

For twenty years after coining the term *agnosticism* Huxley refused to mention the Unknowable in his published works. Then in 1889 he announced that he did not “care to speak of anything as ‘unknowable,’” appending a note of confession to this passage four years later that “long ago, I once or twice made this mistake; even to the waste of a capital ‘U’” (SCT, 311). Huxley’s main concern was to avoid a reference to God as the unknowable (or even worse the Unknowable), for this implicitly granted God ontological status through some sort of act of consciousness, and hence amounted to knowing the unknowable.

In his private correspondence Huxley was less tender in his criticism of Spencer. In a revealing letter to Gould he accused Spencer of succumbing to the crudest idolatry in his worship of “negative abstractions,” and he pointed to the vast gulf between agnosticism and Spencer’s position:

> As between Mr. Spencer and myself, the question is not one of a “dividing line,” but of an entire and complete divergence as soon as we leave the foundations laid by Hume, Kant, and Hamilton, who are my philosophical forefathers. To my mind, the “Absolute” philosophies were finally knocked on the head by Hamilton; and the “Unknowable,” in Mr. Spencer’s sense, is merely the Absolute redivivus, a sort of ghost of an extinct philosophy, the name of a negation hocus-pocused into a sham thing. If I am to talk about that of which I have no knowledge at all, I prefer the good old word God, about which there is no scientific pretense.

Huxley’s frustration at seeing his own brainchild agnosticism perverted by Spencer can be read between the lines of this private letter. His indignation finally spilled over into his published work in 1895, when he intended to air his basic differences with Spencer in public. Ironically, the second half of “Mr. Balfour’s Attack on Agnosticism” was never published, since Huxley died before completing it, and therein were the strong statements on his disagreement with Spencer. Huxley recounted his mixed feelings about Spencer’s *First Princi-
pies when it first appeared. Although he welcomed Spencer's critical positions warmly, "even then Mr. Spencer appeared to me to be disposed to travel along the path—by which, as I conceive, Hamilton had been led astray—further than I was. And in the forty-three years which have elapsed the divergence of opinion thus marked has unfortunately become greater and greater, until now we are speculatively (I hope in no other way) poles asunder." 63 Huxley had moved closer to Mill during all those years. In the first part of "Mr. Balfour's Attack on Agnosticism," which was published in 1895 in the Nineteenth Century, Huxley repeated Mill's criticism of Hamilton that under the guise of faith the Scottish philosopher had inconsistently admitted all that he had ruled out as unknowable (535). The point was, of course, equally applicable to Spencer.

It is not surprising that Huxley's version of agnosticism was often confused with Spencer's doctrine of the Unknowable. Their close personal association was well known. Equally evident was their agreement on the importance of science and the inadequacy of Christian orthodoxy, and their shared opinions on the limits of human knowledge. Both of them called themselves agnostics. Although Huxley became more and more alienated from Spencer's position as the years passed, he was discreet. He did not correct men such as Hutton when they conflated the two types of agnosticism. Huxley recognized that he was therefore partly to blame for the confusion. "I have long been aware of the manner in which my views have been confounded with those of Mr. Spencer," Huxley told Gould in 1889, "though no one was more fully aware of our divergence than the latter. Perhaps I have done wrongly in letting the thing slide so long, but I was anxious to avoid a breach with an old friend." 64 But in 1889 a breach between Huxley and Spencer had occurred, ostensibly over their controversy in the Times on land nationalization. Huxley had actually raised questions about the validity of Spencer's whole a priori approach; this obviously implied disagreement in nonpolitical areas, including religious thought. The quarrel began in November of 1889 and continued for four years, much to the consternation of close friends like Tyndall. Huxley's letters to Gould were written after the squabble had begun, and undoubtedly his hostility toward Spencer loosened his tongue on their differing views of agnosticism. 65

Although Huxley attacked Spencer's idolatrous worship of the Unknowable, he still retained elements of a theistic position and allowed for the validity of some type of theology. In "A Liberal Education, and Where to Find It" (1868) Huxley declared that our life and happiness depend upon our knowledge of the rules of a game infinitely more difficult than chess. "The chess-board is the world," Huxley affirmed, "the
pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us. We know that his play is always fair, just and patient."

Though "hidden" the opposing player could be seen as "a calm, strong angel who is playing for love ... and would rather lose than win" [SE, 82]. Whereas in 1863, Huxley had talked of the passionless impersonality of the unknown and unknowable, here he pictures a passionate angel as underlying phenomena. If ultimate reality is beyond human knowledge as Huxley claimed, then it is hard to see how he escapes the charge of idolatry or anthropomorphism which he leveled at Spencer. Huxley's inconsistency in this matter is a prime illustration of his rather ambivalent attitude toward theism.

Though Huxley maintained that theology is not the whole of religion, and although he actually saw the reverence for the ethical ideal as a more important element in religion, he nevertheless affirmed that a proper theology was a valid part of religion. A scientific theology was a real possibility:

But it is at any rate conceivable, that the nature of the Deity, and his relations to the universe, and more especially to mankind, are capable of being ascertained, either inductively or deductively, or by both processes. And, if they have been ascertained, then a body of science has been formed which is very properly called theology. Further, there can be no doubt that affection for the Being thus defined and described by theologie science would be properly termed religion; but it would not be the whole of religion. [SE, 394–95]

Huxley was sincere when he exclaimed that "if the belief in a God is essential to morality, physical science offers no obstacle thereto" [EE, 143].

Huxley’s theistic yearnings were rarely displayed to the public who read his essays and heard him speak. But to friends he was more willing to open up and speak from the depths of his soul. In 1879 Fiske dropped by the Huxleys to say good-bye before he left England to return to America. Huxley took Fiske up to his study where they sipped a glass of toddy and puffed on cigars. "Then Huxley and I got into a solemn talk about God and the soul," Fiske remembered, "and he unburdened himself to me of some of his innermost thoughts—poor creatures both of us, striving to compass thoughts too great for the human mind." During one of his many intimate conversations with Wilfrid Ward, Huxley remarked that the Christian definition of theism, "faulty and incorrect" as it may be, "is nearer the truth than the creed of some agnostics who conceive of no unifying principle in the world." 66
Huxley realized that his complex position on theology could be open to misinterpretation, particularly in light of his earlier endorsement of Spencer's Unknowable. He became more concerned in the eighties when he perceived that not only was his agnosticism conflated with Spencer's, but worse still, Spencer was being considered the leading agnostic, and his dangerous idolatry was infecting the thought of the agnostic rank and file. Huxley wrote to Charles Albert Watts in 1883 that "until now 'agnostics' are assuming the character of a recognised sect," and he indicated his dissent from the movement by declaring that if there were called a "General Council of the Church Agnostic very likely I should be condemned as a heretic." An agnostic heretic, Huxley recognized, made a poor leader, and he publicly gave up the honorary title of pope which Hutton had earlier bestowed. He admitted in 1889 that if a sect of agnostics existed, "I am not its acknowledged prophet or pope." In 1892 Huxley claimed that he did not desire to imitate Comtists by assuming the position of "master of a school, or leader of a sect, or chief of a party." He added that history had taught him to see that schools or parties usually perpetuate all that is worst and feeblest in the founder's work. Huxley obviously feared that some of the agnostics had already done just that to his original coinage.

The pope of agnosticism actually was Spencer. Huxley was not widely considered to be the leader or even founder of agnosticism during the Victorian era. Upon reading an article entitled "Modern Skepticism" in the *Scribner's Monthly* for 1873 Huxley wrote Tyndall and joked about how he had emerged virtually untouched by the author's criticisms while Spencer and Tyndall were attacked as the head sceptics. "I come in only par parenthèse," Huxley pointed out to Tyndall, "and I am glad to see that people are beginning to understand my real position, and to separate me from such raging infidels as you and Spencer." Other contemporaries who needed a typical agnostic to attack chose Spencer over Huxley. In an article called "The Coryphaeus of Agnosticism" [1882], the *Month* treated Spencer as the chief agnostic, while Harrison referred to him as "the most important leader of the pure Agnostic school" in 1889.

Spencer's "Unknowable" was a lucid, systematic statement of the agnostic position presented in the early sixties, and was considered by many to be an official handbook. Huxley did not have the advantage of a comprehensive exposition of his view of agnosticism until 1889. His *Hume* included a brief discussion of agnosticism but it was presented as Hume and Kant's doctrine, not as his own, and he made no claims to authorship of the term. Spencer's "Unknowable" therefore stood as the
main textbook of agnostic theory until 1889, when Huxley finally elaborated on the original meaning of the term he had coined over twenty years before. But Huxley’s major articles focusing on agnosticism came rather late in the development of the new creed.70

Some of the agnostics were not impressed with Huxley’s articles “Agnosticism,” “Agnosticism: A Rejoinder,” and “Agnosticism and Christianity,” all published in 1889 (in February, March, and April respectively in Nineteenth Century). Tyndall wrote to Hirst on 15 April 1889: “I have read Huxley’s articles. That on miracles especially I thought of little use. It was hacking a dead horse. In these matters I am in favour of the decency of slow decay.” Hirst’s response on 22 April, indicated his agreement with Tyndall. Hirst added, “you and I were Agnostics long before our friend Huxley invented the word.” Hirst’s journal reveals that he was reading all three of Huxley’s pieces and that he was not enthused by the whole series. On 12 June he records that he read the last article and “to tell the truth I became weary of it.” 71

Huxley is sometimes classed as leader of the agnostic movement because he coined the term agnostic, but a number of agnostics were not actually aware of Huxley’s prowess as neologist. Huxley announced his claim in the first article in the series, “Agnosticism.” Hirst was surprised. “He mentions a fact previously unknown to me,” Hirst wrote in his journal, “viz that Agnosticism was the name given by [Huxley] himself to his own creed.” 72 It is unclear when Stephen first discovered that Huxley had coined the word agnostic, but he was unaware of this fact when he published “An Agnostic’s Apology” in 1876. 73

Although the major agnostics, Tyndall, Clifford, and Stephen, did not see Huxley as their leader, they also worked independently of Spencer. Even Tyndall, who was closest to Spencer in his conception of agnosticism, was not inclined to look to Spencer for approval. However, this was not the case with less well-known agnostics such as Gould, Bithell, and Laing, who attempted to popularize science and agnosticism by putting forward the agnostic position in a systematic fashion during the eighties and nineties. They tended to view Spencer as their master and the Unknowable as their deity.

Frederick James Gould (1855–1938) worked as a village schoolmaster and London Board school teacher from 1877 to 1896. He became involved in the Ethical Movement in the late nineties, and in 1899 was made secretary of the Leicester Secular Society, a post he held for nine years. Thereafter, Gould became immersed in lecturing on moral education, and with government backing he toured India in 1913 and the United States in 1914. From 1919 to 1927 he was appointed Honorary Secretary of the International Moral Education Congress. 74
Gould passed through an agnostic phase in the late eighties and early nineties before going on to work in the Ethical Movement and organized secularism.

On 23 December 1889 Gould wrote to Huxley for information to help him prepare a pamphlet on agnosticism. After reading Huxley's *Hume* and the first article on agnosticism published in February in the *Nineteenth Century*, Gould perceived a gap between Spencer and Huxley which he had not previously recognized, "namely, that you do not go so far as a positive affirmation of the Unknowable Noumenon." In response to Gould's question Huxley wrote the interesting criticism of Spencer already discussed. Gould wrote back on 2 January 1890 and sympathized with Huxley's embarrassment in regard to the confusion surrounding agnosticism. But Gould pointed out that the muddle was understandable since both Huxley and Spencer started with the same critical attitude. "I suppose the best way out of the dilemma," Gould suggested, "would be to invent another name for Spencerian Agnosticism" ([CST-HP 17:107, 109]).

But when he published his pamphlet *Stepping-Stones to Agnosticism* (1890), Gould's depiction of agnosticism was unashamedly Spencerian. Belief in a God was laid down as an agnostic principle on the basis that Spencer's "doctrine of the Unknowable is assented to by so many professed Agnostics." In a section on the subject of the limits of human knowledge he presented a short summary of Spencer's "The Unknowable" and referred readers to that same work for a more detailed study.\(^5\)

Huxley's statement that agnosticism varied with each individual was never illustrated more strikingly than in the cases of Laing and Bithell. Like Gould, they considered themselves to be disciples of Spencer, and they stressed the theistic and religious dimension of agnosticism. More than Gould, they presented certain idiosyncratic doctrines of their own as necessary components of any theory of agnosticism.

Richard Bithell (b. 1821), B.Sc. (London University) and Ph.D. (Gottingen), Fellow of the Institute of Bankers and a member of the London Dialectical Society, was the first to see the need for a comprehensive statement of agnosticism in the eighties which would update Spencer's "The Unknowable."\(^6\) In his *Creed of a Modern Agnostic* (1883) he asserted that he was "not aware of any one [who] has, as yet, stated his views on Agnosticism as a definite creed."\(^7\) He willingly expressed his sense of obligation to Spencer in his task of presenting a system of agnostic theory, writing: "I am indebted to Mr. Spencer's works more than to those of any other writer." Referring to "that large body of Theistic Agnostics" who recognized "the existence and activ-
ity of a Supreme Power," Bithell insisted that the agnostic deity be Spencer's "Unknowable." "We not only can worship the Unknowable," Bithell declared, "... it is the only proper object of supreme worship."[78] Spencer's reverence for the Unknowable, by and large kept under control and enunciated in detached, passionless terms, was transformed by men such as Bithell who did not hesitate to indulge their feelings of adoration for their deity.

A barrister, an official of the Board of Trade, three times a member of Parliament for the Liberals (1852, 1868, 1873), and a successful chairman of the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway, Samuel Laing (1812-1897) became an author at age seventy and produced a series of books which garnered him an influence with the general public almost equal to that of the chief thinkers of the day.[79] Robertson remarked that although Laing was not a man of genius "he perhaps converted more men to rationalism in the 'eighties and 'nineties than any other British publicist did by book-work in the 'seventies."[80] Laing's Modern Science and Modern Thought (1885) was a bestseller, second only to Haeckel's Riddle of the Universe in terms of total sales of cheap reprint editions published by the Rationalist Press Association in 1903.[81]

In the preface to his Modern Zoroastrian (1887), Laing reported that for the scientific portion of the book he was indebted to Darwin, Huxley, and Haeckel. "For the religious and philosophical speculations I am myself responsible; for, although I have derived the greatest possible pleasure and profit from Herbert Spencer's writings, I had arrived at my principal conclusions independently before I had read any of his works"[x]. But although Laing wished to be seen as an example of a self-help agnostic, his position clearly resembled Spencer's, rather than Huxley's, brand of agnosticism. "Directly we pass beyond the boundary of such knowledge as really can be known by human faculty," Laing affirmed, "and stand face to face with the mystery of the Great Unknown, we can only bow our heads with reverence and say with the poet, Behold, I know not anything."[82] Laing's approval of what he called "Christian Agnosticism," and his attempt to outline the "Religion of the Future," clearly mark him out as one who underscored the religious quality of agnosticism.[83]

Both Laing and Bithell strike the modern reader as faddists in their rigorous affirmation of doctrines that seem strangely inconsistent with their agnosticism. Bithell's pet theory concerned the existence of a "spiritual body," which he claimed provided scientific evidence for the notion of immortality in comparison to the unscientific Christian idea of the soul.[84] Laing's favorite idea involved the promulgation of Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion that recognized the existence of a
force for evil which would ultimately be defeated by a force for good.

"Now of all the religious hypotheses which remain workable in the present state of human knowledge," Laing maintained, "that seems to me the best which frankly recognises the existence of this dual law, or law of polarity, as the fundamental condition of the universe, and, personifying the good principle under the name of Ormuzd, and the evil one under that of Ahriman, looks with earnest but silent and unspoken reverence on the great unknown beyond, which may, in some way incomprehensible to mortals, reconcile the two opposites, and give the final victory to the good." The advantage of Zoroastrianism, to Laing, lay in its refusal to conceive of God as omnipotent, since this absolved God of responsibility for evil and jived well with the suffering and waste implied by evolutionary theory.85

To Huxley, Laing's eccentricities epitomized a disturbing new element in the development of agnosticism. A vast number of agnostics, with Spencer as their prophet, had built a new church or temple which mimicked a number of unhealthy Christian practices. When Laing compiled a list of eight articles of the agnostic creed, the second of which affirmed the existence of an "inscrutable First Cause" and the eighth of which proclaimed polarity as "the great underlying law of all knowable phenomena," Huxley could not restrain himself.86 His article "Agnosticism" is in part an attack on Laing and a means of defending himself from Wace and other orthodox Christians. Huxley wrote that agnosticism "has been furnished with a set of 'articles' fewer, but not less rigid, and certainly not less consistent than the thirty-nine," and he dismissed Laing's articles on the grounds that agnosticism is a method and not a creed (SCT, 209, 245). Turning then to Laing's theory of polarity in particular, Huxley deemed it less clear than the Athanasian creed, and he compared it to the Naturphilosophie from which he had suffered in his youth. "For many years past, whenever I have met with 'polarity' anywhere but in a discussion of some purely physical topic, such as magnetism, I have shut the book," Huxley told his readers. "Mr. Laing must excuse me if the force of habit was too much for me when I read his eighth article" (SCT, 247). Perhaps Huxley's harsh criticism was misplaced, for it was because of his earlier tolerance of varied forms of agnosticism that Spencer and his disciples came to define it so differently.

Whatever their view on theology, be it Christian or agnostic, Huxley, Stephen, Tyndall, and Clifford agreed that the theologian attempted to embody religious emotion in the language of the intellect. The source of religious feeling was largely the sense of awe produced by contact with nature. Keenly aware of the wondrous order in the natural
world, the original agnostics often adopted the manner of the enthusiastic natural theologian. But was their new religion of science in conflict with their agnostic principles? Did the limits of knowledge act as an obstacle to the justification of scientific principles that grounded their version of natural theology? To answer these questions we will examine the agnostics' worship of nature in the next chapter.