

The Church Guardian

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CALENDAR FOR OCTOBER.

- Oct. 7th—19th Sunday after Trinity.
 " 14th—20th Sunday after Trinity.
 [Notice of St. Luke.]
 " 18th—St. Luke. Evangelist.
 " 21st—21st Sunday after Trinity.
 " 28th—22nd Sunday after Trinity.
 St. Simon and St. Jude. A. & M.
 Athanasian Creed. (Notice of
 All Saints.)

AGNOSTICISM EXPOSED.

By THE REV. PRINCIPAL WACE, D.D.

What is Agnosticism?

In the new Oxford Dictionary of the English Language we are told that "an Agnostic is one who holds that the existence of anything beyond and behind natural phenomena is unknown, and, so far as can be judged, unknowable, and especially that a First Cause and an unseen world are subjects of which we know nothing." The same authority quotes a letter from Mr. R. H. Hutton, stating that the word was suggested in his hearing, at a party held in 1869, by Professor Huxley, who adopted it from St. Paul's mention of the altar at Athens to the Unknown God. "Agnostic," it is further said, in a passage quoted from the *Spectator* in 1876, "was the name demanded by Professor Huxley, for those who disdained Atheism, and believed with him in an unknown and unknowable God, or, in other words, that the ultimate origin of all things must be some cause unknown and unknowable." Again, the late honoured Bishop of this diocese, in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1880, is quoted as saying "that the Agnostic neither denied nor affirmed God. He simply put Him on one side." The designation was suggested, therefore, for the purpose of avoiding a direct denial of beliefs respecting God such as are asserted by our Faith. It proceeds, also, from the scientific source, and claims the scientific merit, or habit, of reserving opinion respecting matters not known or proved.

We are not here concerned with this doctrine as a mere question of abstract philosophy res-

pecting the limits of our natural capacities. We have to consider it in relation to the Church and to Christianity; and the main consideration which it is the purpose of this paper to suggest is that, in this relation, the adoption of the term Agnostic is only an attempt to shift the issue, and that it involves a mere evasion.

The Christian Catechism says:—"First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me and all the world; secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me and all mankind; thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God." The Agnostic says, "How do you know all that?" I consider I have no means of knowing these things you assert respecting God. I do not know, and cannot know, that God is a Father, that He has a Son; and I do not and cannot know that such a Father made me, or that such a Son redeemed me." But the Christian did not speak of what he *knew*, but of what he *believed*. The first word of a Christian is not "I know," but "I believe." He professes, not a *science*, but a *faith*; and at baptism he accepts, not a *theory*, but a *creed*.

Now, it is true that in one sense the common usage of the word, belief is practically equivalent to opinion. A man may say he believes in a scientific theory, meaning that he is thoroughly of opinion that it is true; or, in still looser language, he may say he believes it is going to be a fine day. I would observe, in passing, that even in this sense of the word, a man who refused to act upon what he could not know would be a very unpractical person. If you are suffering from an obscure disease, you go to a doctor to obtain, not his knowledge of your malady, but his opinion; and upon that opinion, in defiance of other opinions, even an emperor may have to stake his life. Similarly, from what is known of the proceedings in Parliament, respecting the Manchester Ship Canal, it may be presumed that engineers were not unanimous as to the possibilities and advantages of the undertaking; but Manchester men were content to act upon the best opinion, and to stake fortunes on their belief in it. However, it may be sufficient here to just allude to the old and unanswered contention of Bishop Butler, that even if Christian belief and Christian duty were mere matters of probable opinion, a man who said in regard to them, "I do not know, and therefore I will not act," would be abandoning the first principle of human energy. He might be a philosopher; but he would not be a man—not, at least, I fancy, according to the standard of Lancashire. But there is another sense of the word "belief," which is of far more importance for our present subject. There is belief which is founded on the assurances of another person, and upon our trust in him. This sort of belief is not opinion, but faith; and it is this which has been the greatest force in creating religions, and through them in moulding civilizations.

What made the Mohammedan world? Trust and faith in the declarations and assurances of Mohammed. And what made the Christian world? Trust and faith in the declarations and assurances of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. This is not mere believing about things; it is believing a man and believing in a man.

Now, the point of importance for the present argument is that the chief articles of the Christian creed are directly dependent on *personal* assurances and *personal* declarations, and that our acceptance of them depends on *personal* trust. Why do we believe that Jesus Christ redeemed all mankind? Because He said so. There is no other ultimate ground for it. The matter is not one open to the observation of our faculties; and as a matter of science we are not in a position to know it. The case is the same with His Divine Sonship and the office of His Spirit. He reveals Himself by His words and acts; and in revealing Himself He reveals His Father, and the Spirit who proceeds from both. His resurrection and His

miracles afford us, as St. Paul says, assurance of His Divine mission. But for our knowledge of His offices in relation to mankind, and of His nature in relation to God, we rest on His own words, confirmed and explained by those of His Apostles. Who can dream of knowing, as a *matter of science*, that He is the Judge of quick and dead? But He speaks Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, of that day when men will plead before Him, and when He will decide their fate; and Christians include in their Creed a belief in that statement respecting the unseen and future world. But if this be so, for a man to urge as an escape from this article of belief that he has no means of a scientific knowledge of the unseen world, or of the future, is irrelevant. His difference from Christians lies not in the fact that he has no knowledge of these things; but that he *does not believe the authority* on which they are stated. He may prefer to call himself an Agnostic; but his real name is an older one—he is an *infidel*, that is to say, an unbeliever.

The word infidel, perhaps carries an unpleasant significance. Perhaps it is right that it should. It is, and it ought to be, an unpleasant thing for a man to have to say plainly that he does not believe Jesus Christ. It is, indeed, an awful thing to say. But even men who are not conscious of all it involves shrink from the ungraciousness, if from nothing more, of treating the beliefs inseparably associated with that Sacred Person as an illusion. This, however, is what is really meant by Agnosticism; and the time seems to have come when it is necessary to insist upon the fact.

Of course there may be numberless attempts at respectful excuses or evasions; and there is one in particular which may require notice. It may be asked whether we can rely on the accounts we possess of our Lord's teaching on these subjects. Now, it is unnecessary for the general argument now before us to enter on those questions of the authenticity of the Gospel narratives, which ought now to be regarded as settled by M. Renan's practical surrender of the adverse case.

Apart from all disputed points of criticism, no one practically doubts that our Lord lived, and that He died on the Cross, in the most intense sense of filial relation to His Father in Heaven, and that He bore testimony to that Father's providence, love, and grace towards mankind. The Lord's Prayer affords sufficient evidence upon these points. If the Sermon on the Mount alone be added, the whole unseen world of which the Agnostic refuses to know anything, stands unveiled before us. There you see revealed the Divine Father and Creator of all things, in personal relation to His creatures, hearing their prayers, witnessing their actions, caring for them and rewarding them. There you hear of a future judgment administered by Christ Himself, and of a Heaven to be hereafter revealed, in which those who live as the children of their Father, and who suffer in the cause and for the sake of Christ Himself, will be abundantly rewarded. If Jesus Christ preached that sermon, made those promises, and taught that prayer, then anyone who says that we know nothing of God, or of a future life, or of a unseen world, says that he does not believe Jesus Christ. Since the days when our Lord lived and taught, at all events Agnosticism has been impossible without infidelity. Let it be observed, moreover, that to put the case in this way is not merely to make an appeal to authority. It goes further than that. It is in a vital respect an appeal to experience, and so far to science itself. It is an appeal to what I hope may be taken as, confessedly, the deepest and most sacred moral experience which has ever been known. No criticism worth mentioning doubts the Passion; and that story involves the most solemn attestation, again and again, of truths of which an Agnostic coolly says he knows nothing. An Agnosticism which knows nothing of the rela-