

THE ABSURDITY OF AGNOSTICISM.

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For the Review

The word Agnosticism was invented by Prof. Huxley, and has come into wide use. It means literally know-nothingness, especially in relation to nature and the power that lies back of it. It is sometimes very convenient for infidels when hard pressed by argument to escape by saying that they are agnostics. But strange to say the people who claim to be of this class profess to know a great deal. They are often among the most dogmatic, and have much to say about science and philosophy. They generally profess to believe in evolution, which in their sense means materialism and atheism.

The most prominent philosopher of this class is Herbert Spencer, whom Darwin styled, "our great philosopher of evolution." He tells us that all we know is phenomena, or appearances, and the power which is manifested in nature is unknown and unknowable. This power he does not call God—he does not know what it is. But how does he know that such a power exists, unless he knows something about it? He has been engaged for years in writing a work on philosophy in several volumes. As philosophy implies knowledge of fact in connection with their causes, I ask, how can there be any philosophy in the proper sense, if we know nothing but appearances, and these not expressive of the cause or causes that lie back of them? To talk about philosophy under such conditions is absurd. Agnosticism and philosophy are utterly incompatible. If Agnosticism be correct there can be no such thing as knowledge. This implies the existence of corresponding reality, but if phenomena are not expressive of the reality lying back of them, then we have nothing which can be properly called knowledge. Here again appears the most palpable absurdity. Spencer tells us in his "First Principles" that the only ground on which a reconciliation between science and religion can be based, is the recognition of the fact that the power which the universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable. Here again is a most glaring absurdity. There can be no religion in the true sense without worship, but there can be no worship without some knowledge or recognition of a person. We cannot worship an abstract and mindless law of gravitation or electricity—there must be a person. But, according to Mr. Spencer, such a condition of worship is absolutely wanting. When he picks up an old arrow-head, or a stone hatchet, or a piece of silver coin, he readily sees the agency of mind, but when he looks out on nature and sees indescribably greater manifestations of thought and design, he says we know nothing about it. There may be one or many gods in the universe, but in such philosophy, a personal being is unknown to us, and therefore, there can be no such thing as religion or worship. We know that the religious sentiment is a fundamental and most powerful element in human nature, but Agnosticism does not recognize this. We should remember that man belongs to nature, and that the science and philosophy must be essentially defective that ignore the noblest part of nature. The religious sentiment in man finds its highest gratification and development in the worship of a personal God. How absurd any system of philosophy which ignores this!

According to such philosophy there can be no such thing as right or wrong, as such. Fatalism, or necessity controls everything. John Stuart Mill, without any Christian prepossession, saw this, and severely rebuked such a system in the following words. "A view of religion which I hold to be profoundly immoral—that it is our duty to worship a being whose moral attributes are affirmed to be unknowable by us, and to be perhaps extremely different from those which, whenever speaking of our fellow creatures, we call by the same name. If, instead of the glad tidings that there exists a being in whom all excellences of which the highest human mind can conceive to exist in a degree inconceivable to us, I am informed that the world is ruled by a Being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what are the principles of His government, except that the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving does not sanction them; convince me of it, and I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call the Being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I will not. Whatever power such a Being may have over me, there is one thing which He shall not do, He shall not compel me to worship

Him." The same writer says again: "My opinion of this doctrine (that we can have no knowledge of God) in whatever way presented, is, that it simply is the most morally pernicious doctrine now current, and the question it involves, is beyond all others which now engage speculative minds, the decisive one between moral good and evil for the Christian world."

Though the word Agnostic means literally a know-nothing or ignoramus, those who take the name, claim to know something, which I do not deny. The question comes up can we know anything? We certainly have positive knowledge of some things, though we may not absolutely comprehend them. We can be certain of the nature of a thing or being, while the degree of knowledge may be limited. Max Muller truly writes: "The true idea of the infinite is not a negation nor a modification of any other idea. The finite, on the contrary, is in reality the limitation or modification of the infinite; nor is it possible, if we reason in good earnest, to conceive of the finite in any other sense, than as the shadow of the infinite." We know that there is a mighty power in nature, and so far as this manifests itself we have knowledge of it, and this power I call God. In the manifestations I see mind displayed. These are expressions of thought, or as Plato expresses it, "The world is God's epistle to mankind." Where there are law, order and adaptation, there must be intelligence, and this implies thought, and thought implies mind and a thinker, and there cannot be a thinker without personality. Therefore there is either a personal God or no God. We know reason, free will and personality in ourselves, and when we see these manifested in nature around us, we intuitively and logically conclude that there is a great personal power at work—that is, a personal God.

When we notice how credulous Agnostics are, we need not wonder at their absurd reasonings and conclusions. I give an example of this in connection with Prof. Huxley. He invented the word Protoplasm, which he defined to be the physical basis of life, and thus to shut out God. He adopted as a conclusive proof the jelly found at the deep sea bottom, which he christened Bathibyns. This was afterwards found to be nothing but the sulphate of lime, and he publicly abandoned it at a meeting of the British Scientific Association. On his visit to America years ago, he adduced in his lectures as the strongest proof of his Agnostic evolution, the fossil remains of what he called a horse, found in one of the Western States. This was about the size of a small fox, which had several toes, and the process of evolution went on until it had but one toe or hoof. This animal (which never was a horse) lost even that one toe, and perished, for no horses were found in America when the Europeans came here. This I give as one of many examples of the blind credulity of some men from whom better might be expected. In view of the evidence on the subject, it is no exaggeration to speak of Agnosticism as an absurdity.

"THE HIGHER CRITICISM AND THE MONUMENTS."

BY D. MCKENZIE.

This is one of Dr. Sayce's more recent works. It first appeared four years ago and, though the progress of discovery in the department with which it is concerned has been exceedingly rapid, is still of great interest, worthy the careful perusal of every intelligent Bible student.

As the title implies, the book deals with the bearing of Archaeological discoveries in the East, on the speculations advanced by Radical critics in reference to the literature of the Old Testament. That well known school of critics has done much to cast doubt upon the authenticity of the Old Testament narrative. The purpose of this work is to show that the records unearthed from the mounds and ruins of Oriental lands leave no ground for such doubt. It has nothing to do with the important question of Inspiration. It regards the Old Testament as so much literature to be examined and subjected to ordinary literary tests and its conclusion is that the discoveries referred to establish the substantial authenticity of that literature. The author entertains great expectations from discoveries yet to be made. He thinks, however, that sufficient information has been already gained to justify the conclusion to which he has come.

The method adopted throughout is to make use of the discoveries made in the different Bible lands to confirm the factor of the narrative derived from those lands. For instance in the third chapter it is shown how the discoveries in Babylonia confirm the Babylonian element in the book