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THOMAS H. HUXLEY AND RELIGION AND IMMORTALITY;
A LETTER FROM T. LAUDER BRUNTON TO FIELDING H. GARRISON

by

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THE Victorian era secured for man the revolutionary concepts of geological time and natural selection and may well have been the last epoch in which the world of science was seriously contested by the principles of theology, if not the ethics of religion. Not since the time of Galileo was there a greater need for resolution and compromise between these opposing forces. Thomas Henry Huxley clearly recognized the conflicting nature of these two divergent forces and, in his lectures and writings, he presented his ideas and views with an eloquence whose clarity and distinction was achieved by few. Still, in 1915, twenty years after Huxley had died, Fielding H. Garrison's comment in his *Memoir* of John Shaw Billings, that Huxley was 'antagonistic' on the questions of 'religion and the immortality of the soul'¹ evoked a reply from Thomas Lauder Brunton to the effect that Garrison had erred in this opinion.

'Antagonistic' is, generally speaking, a strong word and its use can easily evoke response. If by 'antagonistic' Garrison meant that Huxley was 'actively opposed' or was in a 'battle, or struggle for the mastery'² with those who sought dominance of the views of formal religion and theology over the judgments suggested by science, then Garrison was on safe ground. But if Garrison's use of the term meant that Huxley was, *a priori*, 'actively opposed' to religion or the belief in immortality, or that he was hostile to the principles of their existence, Garrison was mistaken. To Huxley religion, and theology, the 'ecclesiastical spirit' and 'clericalism',³ were two separate things and while he was sympathetic with the idea of the former he was intolerant of the latter.

Huxley's biographers are in essential agreement as to his views on the subject of religion and the conclusion reached is that there was no incompatibility between religion and science. Religion for Huxley was simply 'a consciousness of the limitations of man and a sense of an open secret which is impenetrable'; it is 'the reverence and love for an ethical ideal, and the desire to realise that ideal in life which every man ought to feel'.⁴ It was a purpose of religion to 'bring forth the peaceable fruits of righteousness'.⁵

Nor was Huxley in any way opposed to the Bible. It was against the 'applications

¹ Fielding H. Garrison, *John Shaw Billings; a Memoir*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915, pp. 373-74.

² James A. H. Murray (ed.), *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888, vol. I, p. 353.

³ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Autobiography and Selected Essays*, Edited with Introduction and Notes by Sarah E. Simons, New York, D. Appleton, 1911, p. 14.

⁴ Quoted in Edward Clodd, *Thomas Henry Huxley*, New York, Dodd Mead, 1902, p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

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made of it and implications read into it'⁶ as well as its assumed infallibility that he fought. Huxley had a high regard for the Bible. He had the 'inevitable respect of an Englishman for the English Bible' and considered it one of the greatest books in the English language and a 'textbook' of freedom and liberty.⁷ In fact, if there was any kind of formal religion that appealed to Huxley, it was one based on the teachings of the Old Testament prophets. To prophetic Judaism add 'something from the best Stoics and something from Spinoza and something from Goethe, and there is a religion for men.'⁸

The same rational objectivity which would not allow Huxley to accept the Bible as the word of God naturally prevented him from accepting the existence of an immortal soul. It was not that Huxley rejected the possibility of such a phenomenon, but rather that he could see no evidence that would justify his accepting it. 'Give me such evidence as would justify me in believing anything else, and I will believe that. Why should I not? It is not half so wonderful as the conservation of force, or the indestructibility of matter.'⁹

Above all, there was inherent in Huxley the quality of intellectual honesty. His beliefs were based on reason and what that faculty disavowed or could not prove he could not accept. But lack of proof did not necessarily mean lack of existence and his creation of the word 'agnostic' was his submission as to the limitations of man's abilities in the realm of knowledge. For this world, however, rational certainty, and a moral commitment to 'veracity of thought and action'¹⁰ were essential. 'One thing people shall not call me with justice and that is—a liar.'¹¹ As for the future rewards and punishments of immortality, 'Micah, Isaiah, and the rest . . . took no count whatever of what might or might not happen to them after death.'¹²

Morality, to Huxley, had 'no necessary connection with religious belief'¹³ and religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology'.¹⁴ Furthermore, religion was compatible with science. True religion and science were 'twin sisters, and the separation of either is sure to prove 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 bases'.¹⁵ It was probably with a thought of this nature in mind that Lauder Brunton wrote to his good friend, Garrison, the following letter:

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Dear Dr. Garrison,

I have been reading with great delight the charming memoir you have written of my

⁶ P. Chalmers Mitchell, *Thomas Henry Huxley; a Sketch of his Life and Work*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901, p. 247.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁸ Quoted in Leonard Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, New York, D. Appleton, 1901, vol. II, p. 361.

⁹ Quoted in Cyril Bibby, *T. H. Huxley; Scientist, Humanist and Educator*, London, Watts, 1959, p. 59.

¹⁰ Thomas Henry Huxley, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹¹ Quoted in Clarence Ayres, *Huxley*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1932, p. 113.

¹² Quoted in Leonard Huxley, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 323.

¹³ Bibby, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ayres, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹⁵ Quoted in Bibby, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

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dear old friend Dr. Billings. I trust you will forgive me if I write in regard to a mistake concerning another dear friend of mine—Huxley.

You say (p. 373), on the ques[tion] of religion and immortality of the soul, Huxley's attitude was 'antagonistic'. I knew him very well indeed, and, for a long item spent my Sunday evenings generally at his house where he and Mrs. Huxley had 'high tea' every Sunday night, to wh[ic]h they welcomed any friends.

I had been brought up in one of the straitest sects of Scotch Presbyterianism, and, the Bible being the most interesting of the 4 or 5 books permitted on the Sabbath, I naturally learnt to know it well—so well, indeed, that I have only met 2 men who, I thought, knew it better, and one of these was Huxley. Some of his opponents objected to his use of Biblical phraseology, but he was so steeped in the language that he c[oul]d not help it. But, it was not the language only; he had assimilated its teachings and guided his life by them.

Huxley has always appeared to me as one of the most religious men I have ever met. He was pugnacious by nature and detested Pharisees intensely, but I do not think in all his writings you will find such strong language as that in the Gospel of Matt. Chap. xxiii, 13, 14, 15.

In 1879 I married a daughter of the late Archdeacon of Meath. Shortly after our return from our honeymoon we went together to Huxley's Sunday Night. He took my wife a little apart and asked her about herself. When she told him she was a clergyman's daughter, he asked about me. She said, 'Dr. Brunton is a Presbyterian'. He drew himself up involuntarily, and said, not without some pride, 'We were all Church of England people.'

His natural turn for argument was fostered by his father, who set all his boys, two and two at a time, to argue a question. At the end of half an hour they had to change sides and demolish the view they had first taken.

When I tell you farther that, after his death, Mrs. Huxley told me that he had been buried, at his own special request, with the full church of England service, I think you will agree with me that his attitude regarding questions of the immortality of the soul and religion cannot properly be described as 'antagonistic.'

Believe me

Faithfully yours
Lauder Brunton¹⁶

¹⁶ Letter from the Modern Manuscripts Collection in the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.