STEPHEN, Leslie (1832-1904)

Leslie Stephen was an English author and editor who contributed significantly to the debate against religions in the latter part of the Victorian period. Father of modernist author Virginia Woolf and artist Vanessa Bell, he was a longtime editor of the popular literary *Cornhill Magazine* and then the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was also a noted mountaineer, serving as president of the Alpine Club and editor of the *Alpine Journal*. An admirer of eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, Stephen sided with science (especially Darwin) and Thomas Huxley’s notion of “agnosticism,” a term that Stephen was the first to popularize, as the basis of what people can and cannot know. Speculation beyond those limitations was futile. He did not argue about whether religion, especially Christianity, was untrue; rather it was simply unreal. In a letter to William James, Stephen says, “You infer that a man has a right to hold either the negative or the positive creed. My reply is that he has a right to hold *neither*. By Agnostic I do not mean a negative creed but an absence of all opinion.”Some of his major works are *Essays on Free Thinking and Plain Speaking* (1873), *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), *The Science of Ethics* (1882), and *An Agnostic's Apology* (1893).

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