

The Survival Of A Fitting Quotation

"There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments, and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance—that principle is contempt prior to investigation."

— Herbert Spencer

About this article

Most members of A.A. are familiar with this oft repeated quote. The concept has become part of the A.A. way of life. However, the research of Michael StGeorge[†] makes it plain that Herbert Spencer **didn't** write it.

[†]Mr. StGeorge is not an A.A. member so his full name is used here.

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By Michael StGeorge

Edition 1.1

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Introduction

This is the story of a famous quotation and the environments in which it has adapted and survived. To the 20th and 21st centuries, the story would seem to begin in the year 1939 when the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published. A contributing author of that text used a quotation to head his chapter. He attributed the quotation to a man named Herbert Spencer, presumably the 19th century British philosopher, evolutionist, and sociologist:

“There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments, and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance—that principle is contempt prior to investigation.” [1]

In this context, the author was trying to challenge “the mental attitudes of many alcoholics when the subject of religion, as a cure, is first brought to their attention.” [2] In later editions of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (1955, 1976, 2002), this author’s chapter was replaced, but the Spencer quotation is preserved in an appendix to encourage people to keep an open mind about the religious or spiritual remedy that *Alcoholics Anonymous* prescribes for its members.

Since 1939, over twenty million copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* have been printed, and with each copy, another copy of this quotation attributed to Herbert Spencer. The quotation has since been used by a variety of authors. A variation has even appeared in one dictionary of quotations. On the Internet, new variations multiply and mutate. By now, the quotation is famous, and has made the nearly forgotten Herbert Spencer famous in the 21st century for saying it.

But Herbert Spencer never wrote or said anything resembling this quotation.

It is derived from a Christian apologetic work by the 18th century British theologian William Paley. The variations of wording that have come down through the past two centuries only bear a skeletal resemblance to Paley’s original meaning and form.

In *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), William Paley wrote:

“The infidelity of the Gentile world, and that more especially of men of rank and learning in it, is resolved into a principle which, in my judgment, will account for the inefficacy of any argument, or any evidence whatever, *viz.* contempt prior to examination.” [3]

In this context, Paley was trying to give reasons why the Christian faith was rejected by the ancient Greeks and Romans. He was trying to boil down the cause of their non-belief to a single principle.

descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel . On the title page of *Anglo-Israel or, The British Nation: The Lost Tribes of Israel* (1879) Poole attributes the following to Dr. Paley:

“There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all argument, and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance. This principle is, contempt prior to examination.” [4]

Rev. Poole may not have been the author who reconstructed Paley’s words to give us this variation of the quotation, but this is the earliest instance of it I was able to find.

The earliest attribution to Herbert Spencer I found was in 1931 by two British homeopaths. One of the homeopaths uses a variation of the quotation that is identical to the one used in *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Misquotations and misattributions like this are fairly common, and actually make up a significant portion of the canon of famous quotations.

For instance, Voltaire never wrote some of his most famous words: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Voltaire died in 1778, but this quotation dates from 1906. It was written by a biographer, S.G. Tallentyre, in her book *The Friends of Voltaire*. In 1935 she explained in a letter to the New York Times that the words were not Voltaire’s. She was trying to describe Voltaire’s attitude, but did not mean to suggest that Voltaire had used those exact words. She explained that they “are rather a paraphrase of Voltaire’s words in the *Essay on Tolerance* – ‘Think for yourselves and let others enjoy the privilege to do so too.’” [5]

Some misquotations are so-called “improvements” made by authors who like the idea in a quotation, or the kernel of an idea, and so they sharpen up the wording to make it more useful or pithy. This is the case with the Paley quotation. The problem of the misattribution to Herbert Spencer may never be solved. It could be nothing more than a blunder in copying the quotation, or it could be that that whoever did it preferred Spencer’s name to Paley’s.

It is impossible to trace a clear and contiguous lineage for this quotation. However, it is possible to identify recurring themes in the sources which use it. These themes suggest that the sources may have had a common original source, or that they quoted amongst themselves. More broadly speaking, the themes identify "environments" in which the quotation survived.

I have chosen the phrase "alternative knowledge" as the most general of these environments. By alternative knowledge I mean subjects that are outside the mainstream, but are usually being presented as "special knowledge" that challenges the established order. Among these subjects are fringe religion, occultism, and unorthodox healing. I will treat each of these more specifically in the discussion of each source, and I will draw relationships between them.

Some of the movements may not be considered “alternative” in today’s world. The point is that they were at the time these works were written, and they speak from the point of view of an alternative voice asserting itself. It is not my intention to comment as to the validity or invalidity of any of these movements. My goal is to attempt to trace a lineage and to identify some themes that can be generalized toward that goal.

I have divided this paper into two major sections.

The first will follow the history of the quotation as I have found it attributed to William Paley, beginning with Paley’s original and a brief analysis of its historical context and meaning. By giving an account of my survey of Paley’s complete works, I will prove that Paley never wrote the quotation exactly as we have it.

give us the structure of the quotation as it has survived into the 21st century.

The second section will follow the history of the quotation as I have found it attributed to Herbert Spencer. Having proved that Paley is the progenitor of the quotation, I will prove that Spencer never quoted Paley. I will give a detailed account of my own survey of Spencer's complete works and his "unpublished" letters and articles. I will also attempt to end a rumor that the quotation is from Spencer's *Principles of Biology*. The remainder of the paper will follow the survival of the quotation to the advent of the Internet, and will discuss some of the effects of its widespread acceptance as the words of Herbert Spencer.

Throughout both sections I will also examine other spurious quotations or outright misquotations encountered along the way as it seems authors who use one misquotation are likely to use others.

Most of the variations and uses of the quotation I highlight in this paper are taken from books. I found most of these books on web pages where the books were reviewed or quoted.

Though I have found most of the sources through Internet research, I do believe that they represent a good sample of the variety of uses of the quotation in literature through time. It may appear that I have intentionally sought unusual sources because so many of them deal in bizarre topics. But these books represent all of the sources I was able to find.

Granted, the Internet permits anyone to publish just about any wild or entertaining idea they want. But the Internet is also loaded with academic material, mainstream religious writing, full text of important historical works, etc. Considering such a quotable quotation as this by names like William Paley and Herbert Spencer, we should expect to see the quotation used in a variety of contexts on the Internet. We do, though most of these contexts take us into some unusual territory. I believe there is a reason for this.

The major thesis of this paper is that the quotation has survived mostly in obscure literature that often presents "alternative knowledge," that is, ideas that are outside the mainstream and which challenge the established order. These are usually ideas that cannot be proved and in many cases ultimately require faith. Most authors who use the quotation are using it for exactly these reasons. They understand that they are challenging orthodoxy, or just plain asking readers to accept something that will be difficult to believe. The quotation lends itself to this sort of use. It begs for investigation, or examination. So the sources I have found are from exactly the sort of environments in which we should find the quotation lurking. What may appear to be a liability of the Internet turned out to be a key to tracing the lineage. If we had to rely on mainstream literature, this would not have been possible.

If there is a weakness in my evidence it is that I had to rely on a small sample of sources that use the quotation, especially from the 19th century. Nonetheless, I believe this paper gives a good framework for what further research may reveal about this quotation in coming years. The thematic connections between the available sources are not merely coincidental.

When I began drafting this paper, Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* was not available in a searchable format online. By the time I printed the final, the portion of *Evidences* that contains the original quotation started appearing in Google search results. Over the next few years the Internet may continue to produce early sources for this quotation which will help build a more definite lineage.

Will the results of this research render this quotation unusable? It is not rightly attributed to either Paley or Spencer. We also have a growing selection of variations to pick from, none of which can be said to be more valid than the next. Even if we could be sure that we had identified the person who had first "improved" upon Paley's words, could we ethically attribute the quotation to that author without also crediting Paley. An anonymous attribution without some mention of Paley would be equally flawed.

Notes for Introduction

[1] Wilson, William Griffith, et al. *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More than One Hundred Men Have Recovered From Alcoholism*. Reproduction of the first printing of the first edition. Malo, Washington: The Anonymous Press, 1999. Page 380.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Paley, William. *The Works of William Paley, D.D. Archdeacon of Carlisle; containing His Life, Moral and Political Philosophy, Evidences of Christianity, Natural Theology, Tracts, Horae Paulinae, Clergyman's Companion, and Sermons*. Printed verbatim from the original editions. Complete in one volume. New Edition. Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1850. Page 372.

[4] Poole, Rev. William H. *Anglo- Israel or, The British Nation: The Lost Tribes of Israel*. Toronto: Bengough Bro.'s, 1879. Title page.

[5] Seldes, George. *The Great Quotations*. New York: Lyle Stuart, 1960. Page 23 – 24.