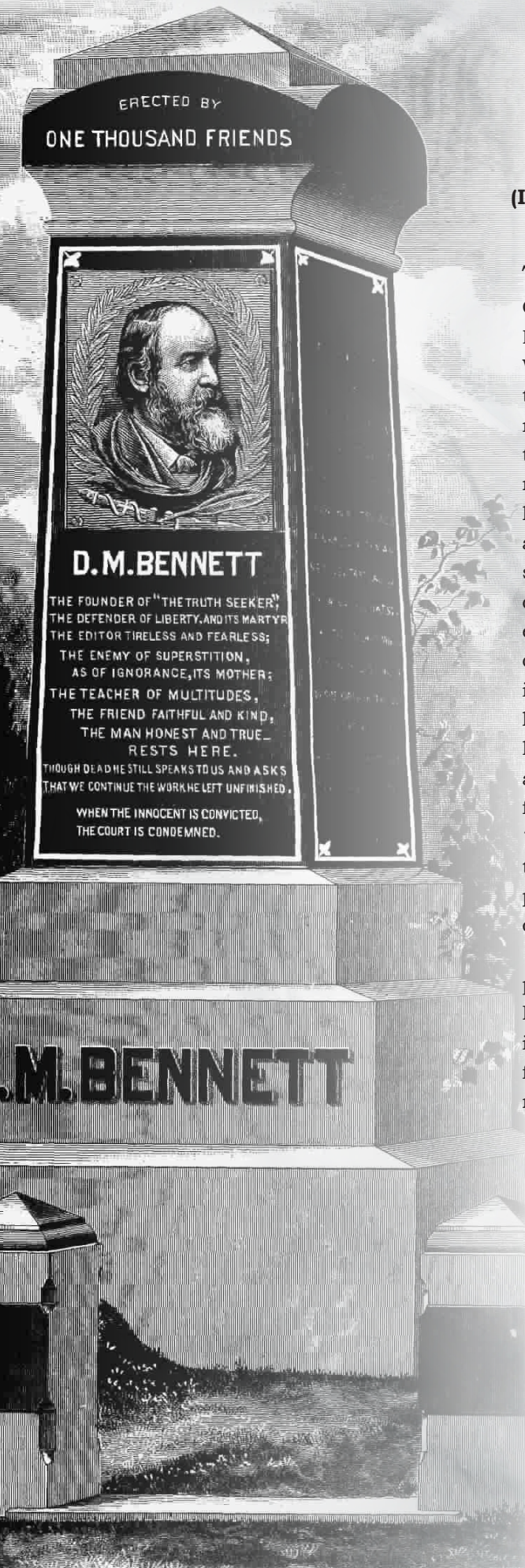


Refacing a Monument

A review by Frank R. Zindler of
D. M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker,
by Roderick Bradford

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THE WORST FATE THAT COULD BEFALL RULERS OR THINKERS OF ANCIENT EGYPT WAS FOR THEIR NAMES TO BE “EFFACED FROM THE MONUMENTS” BY THE PRIESTS AND SCRIBES WHO WERE THE GUARDIANS OF TRADITION. Erasure of their names from the monuments — the public memorials that constituted the first histories of the ancient world — deprived them of the closest thing to immortality to which any human can aspire: the immortality evoked by being remembered. The ancient habit of depriving men and women of immortality has continued into modern times, especially when it comes to obliterating all memory of Atheists and other free thinkers. Physical defacement of stone monuments is rarely carried out anymore, but that is most likely due to the fact that few stone monuments honoring ‘Infidels’ *as Infidels* exist. Rather, our religious society does everything in its power to prevent durable records or memorials of these religious misfits from being created in the first place. When that fails, the fact that a person *was* an unbeliever is concealed and all mention of the fact is carefully avoided. This has been achieved with immense success in the case of Thomas Paine and the other heretics who created the first nation in history that was not founded upon supernatural claims. In his new book *D. M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker*, Roderick Bradford has succeeded in *re-facing* a monument that was defaced and erased more than a century ago by as odious a high priest as ever existed — Anthony Comstock. (Review Webster’s definition of *Comstockery*.)

“D. M. *Who...?*” most readers must be thinking. Even well-educated people today are not likely even to have heard of DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett, let alone know anything about him. As we learn from *a footnote* in Mr. Bradford’s stimulating new book, however, this forgotten martyr of free thought once wrote a letter containing the following wonderful summary of the Atheist position:

We readily believe in everything that we are convinced has an existence. When proofs are placed before us of the existence of a God, we shall at once believe in him. Up to this time we have received no such proof, and consequently we are an unbeliever. We believe in the universe because we see it everywhere around us. Its material and its powers and forces are made apparent to us every hour of our lives. It is not so with God, whether he be called Brahm, Jupiter, or Mumbo Jumbo ... Nobody has ever seen him, and nobody knows the first thing about him. What men think they know about him has come from what somebody told them, and that somebody obtained it from somebody else, and all were equally ignorant ... Our friend will be entirely justified in counting us an Atheist.

Yes, numerous religions existed in the world before the Jewish

Bible was written, and to say the least they were quite as good as the religion practiced by the believers of that book. Our doubts as to the inspiration of the Bible arise from a want of proof. It is not enough for us that somebody says it was written by the finger of God, or that he dictated it. Something more convincing is necessary. Before it can be accepted as the work of God it must be shown superior to what man can accomplish. If gods can do no better than men, they are entitled to no higher credit. The Bible presents no evidence of being superior to human power, but, on the other hand, it is so full of errors and imperfections of many kinds that we are forced to the conclusion that it was produced by crude, ignorant, and unscientific minds. Some of its poetry does very well considering the age in which it was written, but it has been surpassed in later years. Its narratives, its history, its science, and its morals are very defective. We simply take it just as it is and accord no more credit to it than it deserves. It is unjust to apply the ‘eye of faith’ or any other instrument to magnify it into something that it really is not. In many respects it has been surpassed by the bibles of other nations, some of which were written at an earlier date. If it is liable to be distorted and per-

verted by translators, transcribers, and printers it is another proof that it is not unlike other human productions. If God took the trouble to write it or to dictate it, it would seem but reasonable that he should look after it a little, and keep men from changing it and spoiling it.

All religions are fallible, all contain myths, fables, and superstitions which are held up to the world as divine truths. All religions are of human production... There is not in existence the slightest proof that a god ever had anything to do with any of them... It is quite natural for every one to think his own a little the best; but on some accounts the Christian religion is not the happiest. It has the most angry and cruel God, the meanest and most malicious devil, and the hottest and most everlasting hell. There may be some religions worse than Christianity, but it is hard to find them. There are evidently some that have been better, far less tyrannical, bloodthirsty, and murderous. As truth is far better than falsehood, it is always greatly preferred. Even if truth is called Infidelity, it is greatly superior to superstition and blind delusion. There is no man happier in his belief than he who discards fables, mysticisms, and the supernaturalisms, and accepts the truths of the universe and lives in obedience to its laws — who regards humanity as the highest intellect and who does all in his power to improve it.

Christianity has shed far more blood and taken far more life than all the other religions combined. It has made a hell here upon earth in every deed... We fail to see where Christians have any advantage over Infidels. The belief that men and women are going to heaven upon the merits of another individual is a fallacious one, and in the sequel will undoubtedly prove so. The Infidel who depends upon his own good deeds and in living a good life occupies the safer ground, whether in life or at the hour of death. Infidels have far less fear of death and the devil than have Christians, and consequently they are happier. The greatest horror in the world is the continuous dread of an unmerciful God, a torturing devil and an ever-yawning, ever-burning hell. These are the Christian’s portion, and he is entirely welcome to them if he wants them. The Infidel has no use for anything of the kind.

Before going further it must be said that anyone deciding to read this book must resolve to read the footnotes. Mercifully, they are grouped at the end of each

chapter rather than being all clumped together at the end of the book. Anyone ignoring the footnotes will miss a great deal — including wonderful stuff such as the paragraphs just quoted above.

So who was D. M. Bennett? DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett (1818—1882) was a Shaker who studied his way out of Christianity. He was the founder (in 1873) of *The Truth Seeker*, the longest-lived Atheist publication of which I have any knowledge. Mark Twain, Clarence Darrow, and Robert G. Ingersoll were among his loyal subscribers. Bennett’s opposition to religion and religiously motivated obscenity laws triggered a furious campaign of persecution by Anthony Comstock, the U.S. Post Office’s special agent and self-proclaimed “weeder in God’s garden.” The Atheist publisher was eventually prosecuted, tried, convicted, and imprisoned.

When the Infidel author died in 1882 he was interred in the beautiful Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, and his monument was almost effaced before it could be built. Green-Wood was ‘sacred ground’ intended for Christian use only. When cemetery officials learned of a drive by Bennett’s friends to raise money for a memorial obelisk, they tried to prevent Bennett’s blasphemous ideas being inscribed upon it. As friends started the process of having the obelisk inscribed, the cemetery’s secretary warned that the cemetery board had “power to remove any monument or erase any inscription which a majority of its members might deem offensive.” Nevertheless, the monument was inscribed and the long inscriptions still can be read — including their *dénouement*:

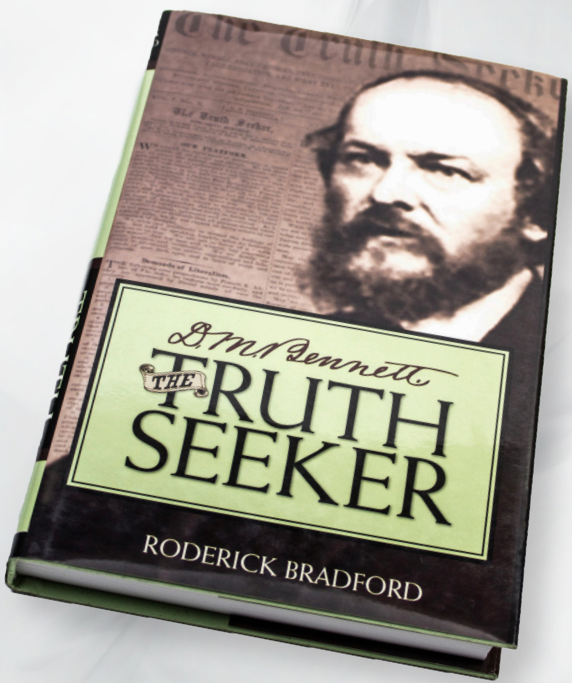
I BELIEVE IN THE ETERNAL POWERS AND PRINCIPLES OF NATURE, IN THE SUPERIORITY OF GOOD LIVES, IN ACTS OF KINDNESS TOWARD OUR FELLOW-BEINGS, AND IN EFFORTS TO SPREAD THE LIGHT OF TRUTH OVER THE DARK SPOTS OF THE EARTH. EACH PERSON MUST BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GOOD OR ILL HE DOES. HERE IS OUR DUTY, HERE IS OUR ALLEGIANCE, AND NOT IN THE SKY ABOVE US. WE MUST MAKE OUR HEAVEN ON THE EARTH, AND NOT IN THE AIR.

Bradford writes with an engaging, natural style that breathes life again into a man long dead — a man whose name has been effaced not from a granite monument but from the larger monument of historical awareness. It is actually delightful and surprising that any scholar, no matter how enterprising and conscientious, could reassemble a nineteenth-century life in such astonishing detail. It is only slight hyperbole to say that Bradford’s work surpasses ordinary biography so greatly that it borders on a resurrection. Readers of *American Atheist* will certainly want to invite the resurrected Bennett into their

homes for an extended visit. Indeed, they will want to buy this book for themselves so he can stay with them permanently.

FRANK R. ZINDLER has been an Atheist activist since 1959 when he began publicly to defend the teaching of evolution and to criticize religious encroachments upon the public sphere. A professor of biology and geology at SUNY for almost twenty years, he was forced to give up teaching when he joined Madalyn Murray O’Hair in a lawsuit that attempted to remove “In God We Trust” from American currency. A linguist and editor of scientific literature, he is a former member of The Jesus Seminar and internationally known advocate of the Christ-Myth Theory, arguing that “Jesus of Nazareth” was not a historical figure. He is the author of many books, including the four-volume *THROUGH ATHEIST EYES: Scenes from a World That Won’t Reason*.

This review initially appeared in the May/June 2007 issue of *AMERICAN ATHEIST* magazine.



If you wish to purchase a (signed if requested) copy of *D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker*, please send a check or money order to Roderick Bradford, P. O. Box 161413, San Diego, CA., 92176. Or use PayPal and send \$32.00 to RodBradford@Gmail.com.

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