

## Identity: Agnostic

### Foundation:

Stanford philosophical encyclopedia: "T. H. Huxley at a party in London to found the Metaphysical Society, which flourished for over a decade and to which belonged notable thinkers and leaders of opinion. Huxley thought that as many of these people liked to describe themselves as adherents of various 'isms' he would invent one for himself. He took it from a description in Acts 17:23 of an altar inscribed 'to an unknown God'. Huxley thought that we would never be able to know about the ultimate origin and causes of the universe." C.a.1860's

### The Great Agnostic by Susan Jacoby

- The father of agnosticism in the U.S is probably Robert Ingersoll who lived from 1833-1899. He was called the Great Agnostic. (Although he saw no difference between agnostic and atheist)
  - Ingersoll traveled to every state in the country except Mississippi, Oklahoma, and North Carolina preaching freethought.
  - Freethought was a term that appeared in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century that encouraged basing life in the world upon observation and not any scripture, that, according to adherents to this philosophy, were written by ancient ignorant men.
- Ingersoll thought himself as a preacher for reason and secularism in the United states. Pg. 8
- This was only part of what he preached. He also thought himself a defender of the Constitution. pg. 6
- Ingersoll was okay with religion that stayed to itself. pg. 16
- Atheism takes the stance that there is no God, Agnosticism has a range of beliefs from God cannot be proven or disproven so if there is a God, god cannot be known--- all the way to there is a God, but I cannot know God as God truly exists.
- Theists believe that a god or gods exist.
- Agnosticism spans atheist to theist.
- A real empiricist will say that God cannot be proven or disproven and since God cannot be proven god cannot be known—there is no belief, there is either knowing or not knowing—therefore such a person is a functional atheist.
- A theist will admit that a god or gods are not completely knowable.
- Agnostics may be looking for proof and direction.
- The new atheists want to pull agnostics into their camp. It is hard to make specific assertions about agnostics without talking to one because the spectrum is so polarized.

### Worldview:

- Religions that claim to know who God is are lies (anti-religious authority).
- Knowledge is universal, meaning everyone intelligent knows what they know.
- Personal experience is knowing.

### Scripture:

**Deuteronomy 29:29** God does not reveal everything to us

**John 17**

Jesus prays for us. That's right for you and I and every other believer that hasn't seen him face to face yet. Jesus says the the world will hate us for our belief in him being God and the one who reconciles us with the Father.

## Practice:

- We need to ask questions and listen, because there really aren't cookie cutter agnostics.
- We have shared ground with many agnostics in that we believe that we cannot fully know God.
- Until someone else believes in and knows Jesus, they will not know God

This Christ in Common recap is for Agnosticism. With this topic we continue our discussion on Identity. The foundation we began with came from a book written by Susan Jacoby called The Great Agnostic. It is a book about Robert Ingersoll and his campaign to convert the United States to Agnosticism in the late 1800's.

The term Agnosticism was actually coined by T.H. Huxley in London sometime in the 1860's. He took the term from the book of Acts chapter 17 verse 23 where an altar is inscribed to an unknown god. This captured his belief that we can never know the ultimate origin or cause of the universe. In short, God is unknowable. Robert Ingersoll mixed that idea with an idea that appeared in the late 17th century called Freethought.

Freethought is the idea that life should be based upon observation alone and not upon any scripture, because, according to the adherents of this Freethought philosophy, all scriptures were written by ancient ignorant men. Both of these ideas, freethought and agnosticism, are born out of the Enlightenment and the modern era where scientific observation slowly became the authority when it came to knowledge of the world. The scientific authority that took over is based upon empiricism, which is the idea that all true knowledge can be observed by anyone and proven.

Ingersoll was an empiricist and so he said that God cannot be proven or disproven and since God cannot be proven, God cannot be known. A strict empiricist believes, there is no belief, only knowing or not knowing. Wow, that sounded a lot like Yoda.....anyways, what that means is that an empiricist agnostic, such as Ingersoll, is actually a functional atheist because if they cannot know God, then God does not exist for them. So some agnostics are actually atheists.

This illustrates that agnosticism has a spectrum of belief that, on one side God cannot be known so God does not exist, all the way to the other side, God cannot be known as God truly exists. There are people that land on both sides of that spectrum and everything in between. In fact, a good Christian can certainly agree with the idea that we cannot fully know God as God truly exists, which makes us a little agnostic.

That is most of the foundation we discussed for Agnosticism and it helped us understand the worldview of people that identify themselves this way. Remember though, there is a spectrum for this one so the worldviews may not apply to all.

In general though the worldview of an agnostic begins with God cannot be known because God cannot be proven or disproven. Next, knowledge is universal, meaning everyone intelligent knows what they know. Which leads to religions that claim to know who God is are lies (there tends to be a strong anti-religious authority tone among some agnostics). And paradoxically to the Enlightenment, personal experience is actually knowing.

Practically then what does that mean for us who are new in Jesus as we encounter people are agnostic? Well, for starters, once again we need to ask questions and listen, because there really aren't cookie cutter agnostics. We also have shared ground with many agnostics in that we believe that we cannot fully know God. Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us that straight out.

And we ended with looking at John 17 where Jesus prays for us. That's right for you and I and every other believer that hasn't seen him face to face yet. Jesus says the the world will hate us for our belief in him being God and the one who reconciles us with the Father. And we need to hear that. Until someone else believes in and knows Jesus, they will not know God, and they may try to make us feel stupid, ignorant, or childlike for our security in faith. We need to remember that bullying, even intellectual bullying, normally a sign of insecurity.