

Why I Am An Agnostic (Revised)

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To begin I want to distinguish between three terms: *agnostic*, *atheist* and *true believer*. True believers are simply people who uncritically embrace on faith any belief or system of beliefs for which there is no empirical validation. For example, true believers make a categorical assertion that a *being* called God exists. An atheist on the other hand denies the validity of any belief or system of beliefs for which there is no empirical validation. In counterpoint to true believers, an atheist categorically asserts that a *being* called God does not exist. In the cases of true believers and atheists, the psychological processes underlying their apparent contradictory positions is very similar. Both make absolute assertions about something that they can't prove. An agnostic, on the other hand, takes a middle road between these two extremes and simply pleads ignorance.

While not limited to religious beliefs, it is within such a context that one most frequently encounters the use of the terms just described. Agnostics recognize that it is unlikely that either claim can be put to an empirical test and publicly validated. Therefore, agnostics stand aside and take no position. The existence or non-existence of a *being* called God appears to be a question of belief rather than one of fact. The one requires blind faith and the other empirical evidence. Clearly, a very large contingent of the world's population have historically been true believers of one sort or another.

To further elucidate the assertions above that "The existence or non-existence of a *being* called God is a question of belief...[that]...requires blind faith..." I will draw on points made in other essays, specifically *The Natural Mind* and *Discernment*, both of which can be found on the Spirit page at www.whollyspirit.innerego.com. In *The Natural Mind* it was suggested that what drives the vast majority of individuals is a *fictive-self*. This fiction is a complex narrative that is created and maintained to explain to ourselves the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that arise from our *automatic programs* (APs). These APs are acquired through conditioning over the course of our lives and remain, for most of us, largely beneath conscious awareness. In short, who we think we are is a product of the *mind*. In *Discernment* a similar case was made that what we call the *world* (human culture), as distinct from the *earth* (matter and natural processes), is likewise a product of the mind and is therefore at root purely conceptual. Imagine the earth without any humans and see how much of what I've called the world remains. A few material artifacts of human culture may persist for a time but the earth will soon enough consume them.

Most people mistakenly believe that their narrative about themselves represents objective reality. The basic narrative normally begins developing in early childhood and there are both personal and cultural components. Various components of the world are included that lead to belief in institutionalized paradigms representing such things as social structures, political institutions, economic systems, religion and so on. Thus, one finds that many people have a personal narrative that includes, among other conceptual paradigms, belief in a religion. Belief in a religion in turn supports belief in a God. The operative word in the case of religion and God is *belief*, which makes both merely a product of the mind.

There are, historically and currently, people whom many would call mystics. Mystics describe what is often referred to as *Unity Consciousness*, *The Divine* or *The Absolute*. The claims of such individuals are said to rest upon personal experience with a direct *knowing* of (as opposed to belief in) Unity Consciousness, The Divine or The Absolute. However, such assertions about personal experience cannot be objectively evaluated or publicly validated. The difference between a mystic and a religious person is that a mystic does not ask you to believe anything but instead invites you to seek personal confirmation through your own experience of what he or she reports. To put this another way, a mystic invites you to engage in a single-subject experiment that often comes with a methodology for implementing the experiment. A religious person asks you to take on faith his or her beliefs.

As an imperfect illustration, suppose I returned from a trip to a country that included a exotic fruit in its diet. I had eaten the fruit many times while visiting but you have never heard of it. I can tell you a lot of things about the fruit but you then only have some limited *knowledge* or *information* that in no way duplicates the actual experience of eating the fruit. Unless you repeat my direct experience by eating some of the fruit you will never *know* what I've tried to relate to you. The taste of the fruit is just an *idea* in your mind, not an actual experience. You may believe from the description that the fruit would be tasty, but you can't know if that is true without direct experience.

Thus, if I recommend that you obtain some of the exotic fruit and try it for yourself this is analogous to the approach of a mystic. If I tell you about how tasty the fruit is and you believe what I say and begin telling everyone you know how great this fruit is that is analogous to the approach of a religious person. As is said in Zen, "*Don't confuse knowledge with knowing.*" Thus, personal experience is subjective and can't be transmitted to anyone else, except as an idea. Mere ideas are always subject to misunderstanding and distortion and often are corrupted in their transmission. One should never invest belief in the truth of an idea.

Individuals who have mystical experiences that reveal to them what they experience as "God" almost universally invite others to personally test their reports and to experientially verify them for themselves. Thus, I'm personally inclined to at least give mystics the benefit of doubt, since they do not ask anyone to believe their reports based on faith. Interestingly, many religious narratives grow up around such individuals after their death. These narratives often appear to significantly distort and elaborate what the mystic actually said or taught. These religious narratives, in my opinion, almost always serve some personal, social or political purpose. I'm reminded of my favorite religious joke that can be found on the Spirit page at www.whollyspirit.innerego.com.

Thus, I am an agnostic because I can see no way to give belief in the existence or non-existence of a *being* called God a factual basis. Related to the question of whether or not a Supreme *Being* exists, there is also the issue of religious belief. Because I am aware of strong human tendencies to invest faith in beliefs arising from mere ideas, which are often the product of irrational thinking, I cannot embrace any religion. Religious beliefs

can have a strong emotional appeal and may moderate existential anxiety, but like all beliefs they are just ideas and have no reality outside of the mind. I recognize and accept that there are awesome mysteries about the nature and origin of the universe that I cannot fathom, but religious dogmas about these mysteries are not satisfying, and ultimately explain nothing. I am open to experimenting with methods suggested by mystics as ways one might gain a direct, intuitive and personal understanding of these mysteries. However, belief in institutionalized religious dogma articulated through a formal organizational structure is the antithesis of such methods. Even should I have success with methods recommended by mystics, I recognize that the experience would be personal and would not and could not extend to anyone else. The Truth known by mystics is subjective and only available on an individual basis.