

Christian Agnosticism

TSSF Study Week
Alnmouth Friary
23rd - 27th October 2006

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 55: 8-9)

Francis was a religious visionary, consumed completely by his experience of Christ. It is not easy to imagine him troubled by doubt about the intellectual credibility of his belief in God. Indeed, that very idea could be thought an anachronism, the language and to a great extent the concept of agnosticism not emerging until the mid-19th century. Yet at least since the Enlightenment, “agnostic” ideas have been generated persistently by the grinding action of rationalist and scientific thought on religious faith. Consequently, many generations of Franciscans and most other Western believers have had to negotiate a thought world first threatened, now dominated, by the continuum of agnostic and atheistic ideas and the chaotic moral relativism in which they are often assumed to culminate.

The agnostic holds that we do not, or cannot, have adequate evidence either for affirming or denying the existence of God. The knowledge of God may be thought to be out of our reach in principle, or else the “objective” (a key word) evidence considered insufficient to support either theistic belief or for that matter plain atheism.

Thomas Huxley coined the word in 1869, using the Greek “agnostos” or “unknowable”. It refers to an intellectual position going back equally far. In “Plato’s Republic”, Socrates is praised as the wisest man in the world by the oracle at Delphi because he was aware of what he knew, and what he didn’t know. Hume and Kant were important precursors. Hume’s “Enquiry concerning human understanding” criticised the standard theistic proofs, questioning the coherence of their causal basis. Kant stressed the limits of reason in speaking of religious propositions. Nineteenth century science was thought to have despatched religious (really “Biblicist” i.e. literalist) claims on many counts. More recently the logical positivists refuted them on the basis that since no evidence can definitively prove or refute them, they must be intrinsically meaningless.

None of these are philosophical last words on the subject, but anti-religious arguments are nonetheless as copious now as new fundamentalist dogmas. This Christmas’s best-seller could be by Richard Dawkins! (“The God Delusion”; 2006). However, let’s notice how often these arguments depend on conflating despair at human-made things with denigration of their putative Creator. Gandhi’s

pithy observation connotes a larger debate: *“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ”*. (Attributed)

We live in an age of uncertainty and its close cousin anxiety. Post-modern scepticism multiplies and ramifies. A minor result is that the facetious 6th former who once giggled at Empson’s “Seven types of ambiguity”, and who has heard that Eskimos recognise thirty different sorts of snow, is now faced according to one source (perhaps writing mostly for enthusiasts) with no less than eight types of agnosticism (strong, weak, apathetic and model agnosticism; ignosticism; agnostic theism, agnostic spiritualism and agnostic atheism!

(<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/agnostic>)

In contemporary usage “agnosticism” may denote no more than widespread uncertainty or even ignorance in matters of belief and spirituality: the malaise of the post-modern, or just the recently educated. Used less unkindly, the word still conjures up a languid lack of energy for the hard mental work involved in trying to reach religious conclusions. A wag on the web catches it nicely:

“I call myself an agnostic to make myself sound open-minded but really I have no spiritual beliefs whatever.” (Web)

It is almost axiomatic that Christians worry about agnostic ideas, seeing them at best as a sort of remediable deficiency but often, much worse than that, as signposting the sliding slope to unbelief. If the atheists are a clear and visible enemy for the true believer, the more plausible and approachable agnostics may yet prove an equally dangerous fifth column. A trip to the Internet quickly finds plenty of strongly expressed repudiations of agnosticism (often with a special frisson about anything called “Christian agnosticism”), though it’s fair to say that most of these come from American evangelical territory. Some self-styled Christian agnostics express a sense of unease as well, though by definition without the same hostility:

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable....with being “comfortable” with my unknowing. For me the Christian life is....the continual crisis and angst of faith.” (Web)

Perhaps unexpectedly, it is also easy to find measured Christian comment. Basil Hume’s remark, *“I thank God that I remain a Christian, rather than the agnostic I could so easily become”* surprises us not by its preference, obviously, but its recognition that doubt lies in such close proximity even to the most mature and well-cultivated belief. The Roman Catholic Catechism takes a calm approach:

“Meeting those who say it is impossible to know whether there is a God (agnostics) or those who believe that there is no God (atheists) is a challenge for our faith, a useful and fruitful challenge even though it can sometimes be perturbing.” (R.C. Catechism 2127)

The Catechism recognises the fact of “involuntary doubt”, while offering a wise warning about what it calls “voluntary doubt”: *“If deliberately cultivated, doubt can lead to spiritual blindness”* (2088). Nonetheless, it is a short step to wondering whether some degree of agnosticism might be an essential component of most Christian thought, rather than its protagonist. An early C20th writer assumed that it would simply lead back to belief. He was of course retrieving the argument from a first cause (try thinking about the “Big Bang”):

“A hundred books of so-called “origins” issue from the press....It is very easy to imagine some imperturbable savage - say a Zulu of Natal, or an English schoolboy - asking the most reprehensible questions as to what happened before the “origin” began....Agnosticism, if allowed freely to develop along its own lines, must needs become a “Christian Agnosticism.” (Canon Curteis; Christian Agnosticism; 1884)

The essence of Christian agnosticism is that it doesn't jettison a fundamental belief in God as revealed in Christ, but it does sit lightly to a host of second order questions that may or may not follow from that conviction. Let's remember how dependent sceptical agnostic, and atheistic, arguments are on simply knocking down fallible human constructs (the church; received morality; avoidable suffering). A Christian agnostic approach can encourage those who are sympathetic to the tradition (most especially to Christ, as he is revealed in the gospels), yet uneasy about ecclesiastical expectations of what else they must endorse in detail (particular doctrines; social and political values and programmes).

A senior Methodist, Leslie Weatherhead, popularised the approach in the 1960s in his book “The Christian Agnostic”. Interestingly this was an early retirement project, perhaps suggesting that Weatherhead knew it would be controversial. He was predictably accused of blasphemy and moral relativism. The 1960s saw a rapid popular movement away from traditional literalist responses to scripture, although many theologians had left these behind long before. That context helps us understand the objective that Weatherhead explains in his preface:

“This book would say to the modern layman, “Don't exclude yourself from the fellowship of Christ's followers because of mental difficulties. If you love Christ and are seeking to follow him, take an attitude of Christian agnosticism to intellectual problems at least for the present. Read this book to see if the essentials of the Christian religion are clarified for you and only accept those things that gradually seem to you to be true. Leave the rest in a mental box labelled, “Awaiting further light”. (“The Christian Agnostic” 1965 p15)

This is the sort of moderate, or “liberal”, position that generally accumulates opponents on all sides. Long before Weatherhead, E.H. Johnson's similarly titled 1907 book recognised this - indeed, with some spirit:

“This book is not written to persuade unbelievers nor to gratify heretics, but for the sake of believers in Christianity who either feel impelled to search, test and arrange Christian truth to some extent for themselves, or who ought to feel so. To the former, this book may prove a comfort, to the latter a wholesome disturbance.” (“Christian Agnosticism as related to Christian Knowledge, The Critical Principle in Theology”; 1907)

Despite a shared though hazy boundary the distance between Christian and secular agnosticism is clear and considerable. While Weatherhead knew that traditionalists, at least, would consider him a heretic, his text could not identify itself more plainly with the essentials of faith.

Once we are primed to notice it, the agnostic edge of much mainstream Christian thinking, and scripture itself, comes quite readily into focus. Similarly, the Anglican emphasis since Richard Hooker on the value of reason, as well as scripture and tradition, more than implies that knowledge of God is problematic, provisional and evolving. Some theologians have argued that we can establish in part what God is not like, but that what He is like will always elude us. The foundation of the mystical tradition is that the transcendent cannot adequately be expressed. Thomas Aquinas, despite his massive work of theological scholarship, is said to have conceded that: *“All theology is brittle, burnable stuff, compared to the majesty of God”*. (Attributed)

Think about “Doubting Thomas” apprehending Christ for the first time after the resurrection. For his lack of spontaneous faith, Thomas seems to have been fated to become a model “unsatisfactory Christian”. It is almost as if the tradition decided early on that he was not “the right stuff”. Yet a second glance finds in Thomas healthy scepticism, and no fighting shy of a truth once it is clearly available to his intelligence and experience. In wanting to employ his rationality, but not setting it above the clear call of God, we might in our partisan way view Thomas as the prototype Anglican.

Again, having first supposed the mature Francis to be distant from doubt, a second look reveals another picture. Francis’s faith was first and last radically Christ-centred. His adoration of Christ was constant, intense and often mystically prolonged, becoming at last the conduit for the stigmata. At the heart of his contemplation he must have faced the final mystery of Christ’s life on earth, his last words: *“Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?”* (Matt 27: 46). If Christ doubted at this point on the cross, then doubt is at the core of our faith and Christ-filled Francis, meditating on that cry, must have shared His anguish.

Nearer to our own time Thomas Merton, the C20th American Cistercian monk and another towering spiritual figure, left what can be called a great “prayer of unknowing”. It begins:

*“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.”* (Thoughts in Solitude; 1956)

Perhaps the early Anglican father, Richard Hooker, shows us most eloquently that agnosticism resides within received belief:

“Dangerous it were, for the feeble brain of man to wade far into the doings of the Most High, who, although to know be life, and joy to make mention of His name, yet our soundest knowledge is to know that we know Him not as indeed He is, neither can we know Him He is above, and we upon earth, therefore it behoveth our words to be wary and few.” (Ecclesiastical Polity, Book 1, Chap 2; Section 3)

So “Christian agnosticism” need not be considered a heresy after all. More than that, from a non-fundamentalist direction it seems quite congruent with mainstream Christian ideas. Maybe this should have been clear to us in the first place, had we not been distracted by the panic reaction that the word “agnostic” has regularly triggered within the church. If so, we have taken a similar path to G.K. Chesterton, who famously wanted to be ten minutes in front of the truth, only to discover that he was nineteen hundred years behind it! His own book on “Orthodoxy”, he says:

“...recounts my elephantine adventures in pursuit of the obvious ... I did try to found a heresy of my own, and when I had put the finishing touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.” (Orthodoxy; 1908)

The pieces began to fall into place for me some years ago at a Dominican study day in North London. The erudite and articulate priest who had given the morning paper made a passing reference to heaven. During the lunch break I asked him what he thought it would be like. I vaguely assumed that the brainy Dominicans would have that landscape well navigated and mapped. I wasn't expecting his reply:

“Well, we are all Christian agnostics, aren't we? Now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we will see full clear.” (1 Cor 13: 12 - NRSV has “*through a mirror dimly*” and “*face to face*”.)

The word “all” cleared much fog. Since that encounter I've considered “Christian agnosticism” a natural and inescapable part of our tradition and collective experience. It is a way of speaking about the gap between faith and certainty. Chesterton would surely smile.

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