

Agnost-a-What?

Emma van den Terrell¹

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What religion are you? It is likely that every adult has been asked some permutation of this socially loaded question and can acknowledge the difficulty in answering it. Personally, I'm a perfectly content agnostic. The many blank looks and questions I've received on my agnosticism reinforce my belief that being agnostic in America is little understood and often conflated with atheism. I, like other agnostics, have "neither faith nor disbelief in God," and, to quote Saint John of Damascus, believe that any God "in his essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and totally unknowable." Agnostics believe that humans can never truly know if there is a God, unlike many religious observers. But agnostics also do not assert that there is not a God, like atheists. I live my spiritual life straddling the line between religion and atheism. As a result, my position is often critiqued, denounced, and downright rejected in American culture. The most common assumption about agnosticism is that it is simply a weak type of atheism, but they are two separate perspectives.

Isaac Saul analyzed agnosticism in his *Huffington Post* article "You're Not Agnostic, You're an Atheist" (access at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/isaac-saul/youre-not-agnostic-youre-an-atheist_b_4675638.html). He asked, "if you truly are agnostic and don't feel like you know, shouldn't you do some things to find out?" At first I was offended by Saul's insinuation that true agnostics have not

really considered the "God question." I have come to my beliefs as a matter of personal discovery informed by critical reading and discussion throughout my studies as a religion major. I then realized that Saul's question revealed a complete misconception of the basic premise of agnosticism. By accusing agnostics of not knowing due to laziness or lack of thought, he misses the point: true agnostics are okay with not knowing and never trying to figure out the "God dilemma." Agnosticism is belief, like Catholicism or Judaism—it's just that instead of believing in God, agnostics believe in a limited human capacity to know if there is a God or absence of a God.

Agnosticism derives from the basic belief that human knowledge is limited by nature. This idea applies to human beings' capacity to know the Truth in many matters; belief that our capacity to know is limited is not a popular perspective. Dissenting opinions originate not only from religious communities, but also from technological, scientific, and philosophical communities. Yes, we learn new things at an unparalleled rate; human beings increase communal knowledge daily. I do not disagree that we have done amazing things as a species, but I don't believe in limitless human understanding. Humans can never know the exact Truth about everything. Even if we could—how would we truly know we were right without an inkling of doubt?

Saul doesn't wrangle with the core belief of agnosticism. His arguments lead to the conclusion that "You can be against God or you can be for God, but you cannot be without him." According to a recent Pew Research Center Study, a "non-partisan fact tank," 2.4 % of all adults in the United States are agnostic and believe you can be without God. Are all of these agnostics' beliefs just plain wrong? What makes an agnostic belief an inherently personal matter, "wrong" when religious beliefs or philosophical atheistic beliefs are

✉ Emma van den Terrell
evandent@wellesley.edu

¹ Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02481, USA

culturally acceptable? In America, agnostics outnumber adult atheists (1.6 %) but not non-Christian religious adults (4.7 %). Yet, the common misconception about agnosticism (if you have faith in anything, then you are not agnostic) still resonates. But I do have faith. I faithfully believe that I cannot ever completely know ultimate truths—including truth about God's existence.

Agnosticism may not be a popular perspective to have, but this does not make it any less valid. Agnostics live in an America where religion and God are disputed in all aspects of life. And the “God debate” is not going away. Positions have become so entrenched on issues, such as Creationism vs. Darwinism, that often theists and atheists don't want to have

open conversations with each other, as this would somehow legitimize the other's point of view. They resort to polemics. Agnostics provide a population of people for both atheists and theists to engage with in meaningful debate without entrenched polemics. We deserve a place in the discussion as we provide a different perspective. So please, don't call agnostics atheists. It not only misrepresents identity, but also diminishes an opportunity for new conversations on religion, atheism, faith, and God in the public sphere.

Emma van den Terrell is a Wellesley College student (class of 2015) majoring in Religion and Peace and Justice Studies.