

Atheism – Agnosticism – Gnosticism

Written by Claire – following on from the discussion about Humanism during our October 2016 meeting.

~

This is my understanding of the terms we discussed at the October meeting. My explanation at the meeting wasn't quite correct, as I was using the term 'gnostic' to specifically mean 'having knowledge of' rather than 'referring to the gnostics'.

Although some people use the terms 'gnostic atheist' and 'gnostic theist', as I did, 'gnostic' normally relates to gnosticism, which is a specific historical term. Gnosticism was rooted in early Christianity and involved very specific beliefs about the physical world and spiritual world. Gnostics believed themselves to have higher knowledge related to the spirit world, hence the use of the word 'gnostic' which means 'to have knowledge'. It's probably best to leave the term 'gnostic' as relating to this very specific religion, rather than using it more generally.

As far as I understand it, everybody falls into these eight categories -

- Atheists - 'I have no belief in a deity/deities.'
- Strict/strong Atheists - 'I have no belief in a deity/deities and I know they don't exist.'
- Strong Agnostic Atheists - 'I have no belief in a deity/deities and nobody can know for sure whether they exist.'
- Weak Agnostic Atheists - 'I have no belief in a deity/deities and don't know for sure whether they exist, but if strong evidence is found then I will change my opinion accordingly.'

- Theists - 'I believe in a deity/deities.'
- Strict/strong Theists - 'I believe in a deity/deities and I know they exist.'
- Strong Agnostic Theists - 'I believe in a deity/deities but nobody can know for sure whether they exist.'
- Weak Agnostic Theists - 'I believe in a deity/deities but don't know for sure whether they exist, but if strong evidence is found then I will change my opinion accordingly.'

The word 'agnostic' relates to knowledge.

Agnostic means 'without knowledge' and refers to the idea that certain things, particularly the existence of a deity, are unknowable. Some people split this

category further, into strong agnostics and weak agnostics.

Personally, as a skeptic, I would put myself in the category of a weak agnostic (although 'weak' isn't a great choice of word). I think it's also probably more of a sliding scale from weak to strong, rather than two distinct categories.

The words 'theist' and 'atheist' relate to belief.

Theists are people who believe in the existence of at least one deity.

Atheists are people who do not have a belief in a deity/deities.

It is possible to be an agnostic theist, as you can have a belief in a god/gods but also understand that you cannot prove/know for sure of their existence. I think most theists would fall into this category.

It is also possible to be an atheist simply because you have no knowledge of deities. For example, someone brought up in a remote tribe that worships nature would automatically be an atheist as they don't have a belief in a deity/deities. You could say we are all born atheists, as we aren't born with an inbuilt belief in a deity (this is something we have to be taught).

Common mistakes

Referring to agnostics as 'people who don't know if they believe in God' - being agnostic has nothing to do with belief, or the specific Christian god.

Referring to atheists as 'people who don't think God exists' - atheism is a lack of belief in a deity/deities (any deity, not just the Christian god).

Referring to atheists as 'people who aren't religious' - 'religion' covers a wide variety of people, including those who don't have a belief in a deity/deities, therefore being atheists by definition, but may have other spiritual beliefs (to do with nature, the afterlife, or the human soul, for example).

Wikipedia has some helpful information (particularly about the original meanings of the words), although the articles can be a bit long and confusing. ;-)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism>