

Are you 100% sure you want to be an agnostic?

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- [0 : 0 0] There's a joke in the rounds at the moment that people in Britain are becoming more religious. In fact, most of them are nuns. Because if you ask people whether they have any religious beliefs, they say, none.
- And maybe that's you tonight. You're not a nihilist. That's the philosophy that believes in nothing and everything's meaningless and there's no truth. That's quite bleak. You wouldn't put yourself there.
- You're not an atheist. That's the belief that we're nothing but randomly assembled clusters of atoms and our thoughts are nothing but fluctuations in particular chemical neurotransmitters.
- And we're hurtling through space with nothing to look forward to but the eventual heat death of the universe. You're not that confident that God doesn't exist. But neither are you a fundamentalist.
- In fact, you're quite concerned when people take their beliefs too seriously. When people get too passionately committed to a cause, well, that leads to people being willing to die for it and perhaps to kill for it.
- [1 : 0 3] And dogmatism can be dangerous and creeds can be cruel. Believers can be blinkered. Anything can be advertised. You're wary of the excesses of any belief system.
- So you're just a humble agnostic. You don't know. You're not saying that you're 100% right or anyone else is 100% wrong. You just place yourself somewhere in the middle.
- And maybe as we did the agnostic diagnostic for some of those questions at least, you put yourself somewhere around number three. Agnosticism is on the rise. So I looked on Wikipedia.
- There's a list of agnostics and some famous ones like the authors Franz Kafka or Matt Groening of the Simpsons fame. The Tychians Elon Musk, Warren Buffett.
- The actors Leonardo DiCaprio, Charlie Chaplin. The philosophers Noam Chomsky and David Hume. The scientists Marie Curie and Charles Darwin. All somewhere on the agnostic spectrum.
- [2 : 0 6] But fewer of them have written explicitly in defence of their agnosticism. One exception is the broadcaster John Humphreys who you can tell this year, or just last year, retired from hosting the Today programme.
- And he came up with a book in 2008 entitled *In God We Doubt*. And he writes this. So my own spiritual journey, if that's not too highfalutin a nation, has taken me from my childish big questions to my ultimate failure to find any corresponding big answers.
- Along the way I've experienced the indoctrination of confirmation classes, the anticlimax of the Eucharist, the futility of prayer, the contradiction between the promises made by an allegedly merciful loving God and the reality of a suffering world.
- So I end up, so far at any rate, as a doubter. Maybe you, like Humphreys, have some sort of religious background and then life's chipped away at it and it hasn't quite messed up the way you thought.

And now you say, I just don't know. Not so sure. Or perhaps you've always seen yourself as neutral. Perhaps you're quite keen to believe in something.

[3 : 18] But you're also wary on just committing to something without being certain about it. The comedian Marcus Briggs puts that quite well. He says, The truth, as I see it, is that I'd rather stay in a place of confusion amongst similar restless souls shuffling about in the hope there might be a sign pointing in one direction or another, than leap aboard whichever bandwagon looks like it's got some momentum behind it and a confident driver.

Maybe that's you. Maybe you're agnostic. But as we start, I want to just begin by defining what we mean by agnosticism. So, etymologically, the word just means not to know.

So, the Greek word gnosis means knowledge. And agnosis means the lack of knowledge. So you could say you were a-Scottish if you didn't like bagpipes.

Or agnostic if you don't have knowledge. But there's different ways to be agnostic. For example, I could say that I'm agnostic about the neurological basis for ventriloquism.

And whether your perception about where a sound comes from is influenced by what you see. And I used to know a little bit about that because I did a PhD in neuroscience about 20 years ago and that was something I was interested in.

[4 : 36] But I haven't kept abreast of the literature for the last 20 years. I don't know what they found out. So, I couldn't tell you the latest state of research. So, I'm agnostic about it. In other words, it would be possible to know.

It's just I don't know because I haven't looked into it enough. Or to give you a silly example, I'm agnostic about how many helium balloons it would require to float my mother into the atmosphere. I mean, it would be fairly easy to find out.

It's a pretty straightforward experiment. I mean, it would be quite a cool experiment because my mother's scared of heights. But I don't know. I could know. But I just haven't done the research.

And it might be that you're agnostic about questions of God in that kind of way. It would be possible for you to know. It would require some reading and some thinking. But you just haven't done that reading or thinking yet.

And so you get there. And I want to persuade you later, I hope, to do that kind of reading and thinking so that you can know. But there's another kind of agnosticism that, so I don't know if I haven't looked into it.

[5 : 38] There's another kind of agnosticism that's a bit more dogmatic, can I say. The agnosticism that says, I don't know and it wouldn't be possible to know.

I'm a kind of committed agnostic. But that really isn't a very logical position at all because it ends up not being very agnostic about itself.

You're actually saying, I know that you can't know. And how do you know? I mean, you'd have to know everything about the whole universe to be sure that there was no evidence somewhere that you hadn't looked into for there being God.

It's like me saying, I know that there's no treasure hidden in Leicestershire. I mean, how can you make a claim on that? You'd have to have dug everywhere. And it turns out that even the University of Leicester Archaeological Department, who, let's face it, do more digging than most of us, didn't entail reasonably even though that the reserves under their local car park.

To say that you can't know something is to rule out the possibility of ever finding anything out that might make you wrong. So the sort of absolute agnostic is, I think, it's a silly position.

[6 : 51] So you can be agnostic because you haven't looked into it, but you could. You can pretend to be agnostic in that absolute way, but that's just silly. But there is one more kind of agnosticism, and this is less a position and more of a strategy to keep annoying Christian friends at bay.

Let me tell you about one of the most memorable lectures I received at Theological College by one of my professors. A fantastic guy. He walked into the room one day, the lecture room, and he said, The Earth is flat.

Convince me otherwise. And then he folded his arms, smiled, and waited. And, you know, hands went up straight away. And someone said, It looks round from space.

He shook his head. NASA faked the photographs. He says. Okay, fair enough. Someone else said, Oh, well, the magnetic field would be, you know, such and such.

He says, Oh, you're just trying to blind me with science. I can never check that. And then, you know, people went to, Oh, I went to Australia. Yeah, it's just a very, very long way to the east. Or, you know, whatever people tried, he had an answer.

[8 : 00] And sometimes the answers were ridiculous, but he just batted things away for about 50 minutes. And then someone said, Hang on a minute. Like, whatever evidence we give you, you ignore it.

It's almost like you don't want to be persuaded. And then he smiled and said, Excellent. Today's lecture is on scepticism. Shall we get started?

And his point was that the sceptics always, And you know this, Without having a philosophy lecture, You know this is about three-year-olds. And they say, Why? And you think, Oh, my three-year-old is very insightful.

And you give them a silly answer. And why? Oh, excellent. They want to get to the real world bottom of everything. And why? And then you realise it's just a three-year-old. So you can always win that kind of game.

But of course, It's actually designed never to get you to the answer. You don't want to know the answer. The agnostic always wins. It's less a position than a strategy.

[8 : 58] You know whether that's you. It certainly was me. I wanted to keep Christianity at arm's length. Because actually I had a fear that if it was true, It would be bad.

I wanted to be agnostic because, I thought Christianity could be very inconvenient for me. If there's a God, Yeah, I've got to take account of him and respond to him.

And that might mean, Implications for my life that I don't want. And how comforting it is to keep it at arm's length. It's like those slings on the side of the bus a few years ago.

There's probably no God. So you sit back and enjoy life. The implication being, If there is a God, That could seriously hamper your style. I remember a friend of mine telling me about Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine.

You may have heard of it. He said it was a great surprise for him That Jesus had done that. And he didn't mean it was surprising because it was scientifically surprising. He meant it was surprising because it didn't fit his nation of God.

[10 : 00] Who he assumed would be going around the world turning wine into water. God's greatest fear was that someone, Somewhere might be enjoying themselves a bit too much. And if that's your view of God, Then I can see how you would try anything to avoid going near those questions.

Because you don't want your life to be wrecked. And that maybe was my fear. I think it was a misplaced fear. But I used agnosticism as a strategy. So three kinds of agnosticism. And I wonder which are you.

Well, The first fight is really easily cured. I can put it that way. If you don't know because you've never looked into it, Look into it. And I think you've got a very high chance of success.

Of finding out, Is there a God? Does he want to know me? What's he like? I think you can be very confident about that. If you're the second kind, I think you're being philosophically absurd. If you think you know you can't know.

I think that's an indefensible position. If you're the third kind, I want to persuade you not just that Christianity might be knowable and true, But also that it's good.

[11 : 03] And you don't need to keep it so hidden. So, yeah. There we are. That's my way to do that. I want to just make three points. And I'm going to make them from this little bit of the Bible that you've got printed out. There's two different sizes, Depending on how good your eyesight is.

There is no shame in using the one with a legible size font. I don't know why Jake printed one of them in sort of micro-fish. Micro-fish. Sky camera size.

But if you can see one of those, It will just help me in what follows. And I've got three brief points.

And the first one is that the truth is a person. There is no need to be agnostic. The truth is a person. There's no need to be agnostic. I'm going to read you the first paragraph.

This is a letter written by one of Jesus' disciples to some early Christians. He says, Jesus Christ.

[12 : 30] And just pause then. I'm going to come back to that in a moment. I quite like going to modern art galleries on a day off. And recently I went to the White Cube in Bermondsey. If you've been there just a few minutes walk from London Bridge Station.

And just last year there was an exhibition of 350 paintings by the German artist Peter Dreher. And each measured 8 by 10 inches. And every single one of the 350 paintings was a painting of the same glass of water painted on successive days.

In fact, he has sketched the same glass every day since 1974. Now, I mean, it's kind of impressive just as a discipline. And they're not sketched. They're very, very detailed pictures.

So he's captured every nuance of the reflected light. And it's kind of mesmerizing. But he did it. We read that even more fascinating than the paintings themselves is the stuff that the art historians write about it.

Here's the commentary. We're told that, quote, Dreher's studies of matter, light and time demonstrate an artist's meditative focus can reveal great fullness, even in an empty glass.

[13 : 36] Sounds good, doesn't it? Or, also, it turns out that it's a routine of coping and healing as he'd lived after the aftermath of World War II in Germany as much as it is an exploration of artistic conventions.

I mean, it's fun, isn't it, to see some of the sort of hyper-leated stuff that people write about modern art. But it's not that unusual in our world to find people talking about philosophical ideas.

So you can read The New Yorker or The Spectator or The New States and whatever is your bag. Or you can go to an art gallery. People talking about big concepts like what is life?

What is a human being? What is time? Yeah, it's pretty normal. You can find stuff written about that all over the place. Meanwhile, I was on Facebook the other day and my stepbrother is head of education at a concert hall in Essex and he said, oh, we just had the same-so quartet come and play for us and it was excellent.

That's quite normal as well, isn't it? People writing about what happened to them in their day and giving you eyewitness facts. Like, he saw this quartet, they were really good at this place. But the thing that is amazing about this paragraph that I've just read and really, really unusual about this paragraph is it combines both kinds of writing in the same paragraph.

[14:57] In other words, it combines the biggest philosophical questions, what is life? What is a human being? Where did we come from? What's our beginning? Sort of art gallery questions.

And it combines that with, this is what happened in my day. Someone I met today. Sort of Facebook status update. Eyewitness biography stuff.

But it's in the same paragraph. In other words, John says, oh, the reality of the beginning of the universe. Oh, yeah, I saw him. Yeah, I met him.

The life, the essence of life. Oh, yeah, I touched it. And of course, he's talking about his encounter with Jesus Christ, with whom he spent three years of his life as a fisherman, going on boat trips, meeting crowds, hearing his teaching, witnessing his execution.

And then he claims also to witness his resurrection. And so for John, the truth about the world, the truth about reality, the truth about all these philosophical concepts, he's a person he met and saw and touched and heard.

[16:14] And that means that he's pretty sure about it. Don't you just ask me, how sure are you about your philosophy of life? And I said, oh, I'm very sure about it.

You'd say, that's very dogmatic. But if you said, how sure are you that you met Jake earlier today? I'm pretty sure. I mean, I was talking to him and he gave us some treats and we had chatted together.

I mean, you can be pretty confident about encounters with people when you were there. That's just pretty sensible. But for John, the encounter with the person was the encounter with life itself.

because the truth is a person. Life is a person. The beginning, the one he was before everything is a person. He was in history.

He got into a fishing boat if you just got a John Metz. In fact, it would be quite odd, wouldn't it, to be agnostic about that. Let's imagine tomorrow, one of your kids says to you, you know, Daddy, what were you doing last night?

[17:12] And he said, oh, I met a bald guy, called Andrew and she goes, are you sure? And he goes, I mean, yeah, recently so, I'm not losing my mind or anything, I've got a fairly good memory and it's a, it would be odd, wouldn't it, to say, oh, yeah, you're right, I don't really know.

In the face of real, sort of, eyewitness, you were there evidence. Except for John, the evidence wasn't just, I met Jesus and he was a bald guy doing a talk, it was some things that were even less easy to forget.

I met Jesus at a wedding and he turned water into wine and I'm not going to forget that. I met Jesus on a picnic and more people turned up than we expected. Actually, 5,000 more people turned up than we expected.

I know you had some spare sausages, Andrew, but that would be stretching a bit. And, but Jesus just made more food and not, never going to forget that. And then, a bit later on, we went on a boat trip and I'm quite good at boat trips, I'm a fisherman, but then Jesus started walking on the water and this wasn't in the, in the Antarctic.

I mean, the sea was very much, not frozen and I'll never forget that. And then, I was at his execution and I won't forget that. And then, three days later, I saw him and met him again after he was dead but was now alive and I won't forget that.

[18 : 26] You probably know the story of Johnson Thomas, as it's called, he's called agnostic Thomas just to fit with today's theme. He was one of John's friends and you probably know the story that when Jesus was risen again from the dead, people were telling Thomas, he's back, he's alive again.

Thomas said, I can't believe something like that without some serious evidence. I mean, I would have to actually touch him to be sure that he's really alive.

And Jesus appears to Thomas and says, go on then, touch me. It's actually a really good sign, isn't it? Because you can, by touching someone you can be pretty sure whether they're actually there.

Yeah, I mean, I'm sorry, I'll ask your permission to do this, but if you were a ghost, I imagine my hand would just sort of, you know, you've been through it, wouldn't it, just a mirror, but I'm meeting sort of actual action. But it's an even better test than that because you can tell if someone's alive or touched him, but by touching, Jesus says, my hands and my feet, that's the place where they put the nails in to execute him, so the scars of the crucifixion.

That's a really good test because by touching the execution scars, you can be sure whether he's alive or not, but you can also check that he's the same as the guy that they killed. So the guy that they killed is definitely this guy because he's got the holes in his hands and he's definitely alive because I can touch him and he's amusing and here he is and I'm pretty sure now.

[19 : 52] So agnostic Thomas becomes certain from us because of something that happened to him in eyewitness history. I think actually John is alluding to that account where he says not just we've seen it, this life, but he says we've touched it with our hands.

He will never forget that morning when Thomas touched a dead man, he was now not dead, with his hands. Now I know you weren't there, but they were there and they weren't agnostic about it.

historical events you can be sure about. But I wanted to notice they weren't just sure, but they were also happy.

They didn't say oh bother, it turns out there is a eternal life after you, and there must be a God and what drag and that's going to mess up our lives now because he's going to go around wrecking all our fun.

They're very, very happy about it. Did you notice that at the last end of the first paragraph, they're writing these things to you so that our joy may be complete. We are very, very chuffed to have found life.

[21 : 10] It turns out he's a wonderful person and the Lord Jesus is the best thing that we've ever, ever discovered. And we want to tell you so that you can be happy.

So two points. The truth is a historical person, there's no need to be agnostic. But also they were happy as well as sure.

No need to keep it at arm's length. I mean, you can ask yourself, I asked myself this question when I was an undergraduate looking into it. Has Jesus wrecked the lives that the people I know do follow him?

And the answer is actually no. And there's some things I used to pity them for. I mean, I speak specifically, I pitted them that they saved themselves for sex in marriage, which, you know, when I was 18 at the time, I thought, gosh, how backward that is, you're denying yourself a lot of fun.

I used to sort of envy the people who were most sexually adventurous and pity the people who were Christian. And then, 20 years on, the people who were sexually promiscuous have, I've seen, really damaged and hurt by it.

[22 : 18] And the Christians who saved themselves, I've seen in wonderfully stable marriages. And I thought, actually, they had a happier time in the long run, it turns out. Or you thought, oh, what about the fact you can't get drunk?

I used to pity Christians because they never got drunk. I mean, in the 20 years since then, one of my closest friends' wives was an alcoholic and died of that, leaving two children.

It's pretty horrible, actually. Whereas the people who were in God's gifts in their sort of measured, sober way have been spared for some of those things. And it actually turns out that Christians that I know have flourished and the good that they know has been good.

And John says, oh, yes, yes, it brings me great joy to tell you about this. I know about it because I was there. I saw him and touched him and told him, but I can also testify he's really good.

And for me, that was certainly the last piece in the jig. So I got convinced Christianity was true, but I had to be convinced it was also good. And it was looking at the character of Jesus and the change he made in people's lives that persuaded me of that.

[23 : 32] So one more point, one last point. the truth is a person, there's no need to be agnostic, but the truth is about a solution to a terrible problem.

It's not safe to be agnostic. fantastic. So let's look at, you want a summary of the Christian message in 11 words. You've got it there in the beginning of the second paragraph. This is the message we've heard from him, from life itself, from God himself, and proclaim to you.

Here it is. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. It's a pretty petty summary, isn't it, a Christian message?

God is light, in him there is no darkness. At all. In other words, it's something quite profound here, it's saying God is only good, and no evil.

Light is a kind of metaphor for good, and darkness is a metaphor for evil, because dodgy things happen in the dark, and out in the open, tree things happen in the light. Well, God is light out in the open.

[24 : 35] He's never shady. That's what he's saying. In other words, it's not the same as the eastern religions, where yin is yang, and yang is yin, you know, the little symbol with the swirl, the black and white swirl, and the black blends into the white, and the white blends into the black, and there's a dot of white in the middle of the black, and the point of that symbol is to say, everything is one.

Actually, that's the eastern philosophy. God is good, and he's evil, and God is you, and you are the table, and the table is the couch, and the carpet is me, and I am God, and everything is one.

That really is the philosophy, and the Bible says, no, no, that's wrong. No, God's the light, the good, and not the bad.

There's no bad in him at all. But immediately, that then creates a problem. Next sentence, if we say we have fellowship with him, we have friendship with him, while we walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not practice the truth.

So here's the problem. God is light, but we're not always. Sometimes we are a bit shady. Sometimes there are things that aren't out in the open about us.

[25 : 54] There's things about you that I don't know about, that if I did, I would like you a bit less, and there's things about me that you don't know, that you would like me a bit less, that are just hidden away, dark, shadowy things.

But the problem Jesus says is what God hangs out in the light, and if you hang out in the darkness, you can't be friends. If you walk on the sunny side of the street, and I for reasons of hairline, walk in the shady side of the street, we can't walk down the street together.

And if God's in the light and you're in the darkness, you can't hang out together. There's a problem, there's a broken friendship between us and the good God. That's the diagnosis. And the voices are really serious, and one day we'll be cut off and God's goodness forever, be banished from his light into what Jesus calls the darkness, where there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We can't be in the light with God if we're going to be shady. And that's the problem, and then the Bible has this wonderful solution. Verse 7, if we walk in the light, it's his in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

And the blood of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sin. It's a message about a death, sacrificially, that brings cleansing. That brings dark people into the light.

[27 : 11] That brings people estranged from God into friendship with God. I want to apply this agnosticism for a minute, because in other words, the Christian message, I hope you can see, is a message about something that is very badly wrong with the world.

We're cut off from the God who's the source of all good and light. And yet, wonderfully, there's a solution to that problem. Jesus can bring cleansing. It's a very simple summary of the solution message.

I want you to see that that then entails a problem-solution message, entails the need to make a decision about it. It's not safe to be agnostic.

And let me give another problem-solution analogy. Let's imagine I go to the doctor and the doctor says, oh, Andrew, I'm very sorry, but you've got a very serious cancer and you're going to die.

But, fortunately, there is a treatment that is actually pretty successful if it's called it to people at your stage. And I recommend that you start the chemo immediately and I think you'll probably be okay.

[28 : 11] And I say to myself, I'm not sure I trust that doctor. I mean, you know, they get paid for this by the drug companies, don't they, for this kind of treatment. And chemo therapy makes you very ill. And I feel fine.

I think they're probably okay. But I'm a bit unsettled, but I mean, I suppose I'm a bit agnostic, really. Should I take the treatment or not?

Should I trust the doctor or not? And I'll ask, let's say, I go and ask another doctor. Maybe I'll ask some sort of faith healer and they say, oh, no, I think you're probably fine and make sure you eat lots of fruit and take a holiday and so on.

And I say, the doctor, will fruit and a holiday help me? He says, no, no, you'll only help this chemo. So it's a similar kind of message. It's a message about a terrible problem, but with a solution. But the question is, what path do I then take?

Because it seems to me there's only actually two parts. I can either take the chemo or not. I can't do neither.

[29 : 16] I can't suspend the decision. I could just wait. I could decide later. I could wait a year, which is actually the same as deciding not to take the chemo.

I've just not taken it for a year while I've been deciding whether to take it, which is the same. So I don't know becomes the same as no. And it seems to me that's sort of intrinsic to a problem solution message.

And that's what the Bible's message is. We're in terrible trouble, says Jesus. For his light, there's no darkness at all in him. And if we're in the darkness, we can't think we're friends with him.

But there's a solution. We come into the light, it's his and the light. Then we have fellowship with one another, and the brother of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sin. But what are you going to do with that message?

You can't do nothing. Well, you can do nothing, but doing nothing is the same as deciding it's wrong. I'm not going to take the chemo. Or you can respond to it and come with the light, which is the same as believing the doctor.

[30 : 14] Well, in that scenario, what you're actually going to do is say, if I just need to check the doctor, probably, I think, I'll do some research. Did he pass his medical exam? Is he still a member of the General Medical Council?

Has he got a good track record of other people who should have a cancer? By all means, it asks those sort of serious questions, but you're probably going to spend quite a lot of your time researching the doctor and the cancer from that point onwards, rather than shelving it or keeping it in the arms left.

So, for some reason, what kind of agnostic are you? Maybe you're the kind that says, I don't know yet because I've not looked into it. Or look into it, please do. Maybe you're the kind that says, I can't know.

I think that's philosophically absurd. Maybe you're the kind that says, I don't want to know in case it messes up my life and my suggestion to you is it won't mess up your life. There's no evidence that Jesus ruins people's lives.

It's quite the opposite. He sorts people's lives out. We come to Jesus, we find that the truth is a person in history with real facts behind it.

[31 : 16] There's no need to be agnostic. And the truth concerns us to lead into a terrible problem. He's not safe to be agnostic.