

## THE AGNOSTIC MISSIONARY

Yesterday, an agnostic knocked on my door, trying to convert me to his faith.

“Good afternoon sir,” he said with a bright smile, as soon as I opened the door.

“May I have a moment of your time to share with you the joys of agnosticism?”

“Agnosticism? Isn't that the belief that we can't ever really know if God exists?”

The agnostic grinned. “Why, yes it is! You see, we-“

“I'm sorry,” I replied. “I'm very busy.” I tried to close the door, but he had shoved his foot inside the threshold.

“May I just ask you sir if you believe in God?”

“Actually, I don't. I'm an atheist.”

“But sir,” he said, pulling a brochure out of his shoulder bag, “how can you be sure God does not exist? How can you know?”

“I just don't see any concrete evidence of God.”

He smiled. “I understand completely. But have you seen any concrete evidence that He does *not* exist?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I don't think that God, as an ultimate force of good, would allow such evil and pain to exist in the world.”

“But don't others tell you that we cannot know the ways of God and that He may have a higher design or purpose for the atrocities we see?”

“Well, yes, I have heard that. But I don't believe it.”

“Doesn't a belief in God require a kind of blind faith?”

“Yes, of course. That's partly why I'm –“

“And doesn't the opposite belief – that of atheism – require a similar blind faith?”

“Excuse me? Faith in what?”

“A faith, which cannot be proven, in an alternate explanation for our existence.”

“I suppose.”

“Both belief systems, and all theistic religions, require a profound element of faith, precisely because the belief system cannot be proven. Agnosticism accepts this limitation and embraces it. Can you, sir, question that we cannot know with absolute certainty the existence of God?”

“Yes, I can. From what I have seen and studied, I’d say that I know there is no God.”

“Ah, but can you prove it? You see our arena of our acquired knowledge is limited to the capacity of our five senses and thus we can only prove or disprove things within the natural world, things that we can see, hear, taste, smell, or feel in a tactile manner. It’s impossible for us to perceive and therefore comprehend anything beyond the world of natural phenomenon, including any possible existence after death or before birth, if there is an eternal soul.”

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head. “I can’t know. It’s beyond our capability. It’s all here in our brochure ‘I Don’t Know’. It clearly outlines what we are and are not capable of knowing and specifies our intellectual limitations.”

He handed me the brochure and I looked at the cover – a picture of a large question mark with an ‘A’ inside the loop.

“Your brochure is called ‘I Don’t Know’?”

He nodded. “Our motto is ‘Acknowledge the Unknowable’. Thomas Henry Huxley, who coined the term ‘agnostic’, declared that man should not say he knows or believes something that he has no grounds for professing to believe. There’s a statement of his founding philosophy on page three.”

I handed the brochure back to him. “I’m sorry. I’m not really interested.”

He looked surprised. “You’re not interested in understanding the realm of human knowledge?”

“Not really.”

“You’re not interested in the existence of God?”

“But you don’t know if God exists.”

“Precisely. I acknowledge the unknowable. I embrace the limited realm-“

“Listen. I was just about to make supper. I have to go.” I began to close the door, but he would not move.

“Sir, I understand how busy you are and I promise not to take up too much more of your time but I’m sure you’ll agree that the issue of our very existence and how we came to be must be the most important question we as human beings can ask ourselves.”

“But you don’t even have an answer!”

“Of course not. How can we know the unknowable? The problem with other religious belief systems is that because they are built on a foundation of faith – faith in the existence of a higher power – the presence of doubt or any form of questioning the religion, undermines the belief system. There is no such flaw in agnosticism because the belief system itself is based on doubt. We acknowledge that God may not exist. Even atheism, sir, although it is a belief that there is no God, may be undermined by

occurrences that make you doubt your *non*-belief. But, once again, agnosticism embraces that doubt by clearly stating that God *may* exist.”

“I don’t know.”

He smiled. “Neither do I, sir. We *can’t* know.” He reached into his bag and pulled out another pamphlet. “There is an Agnostic Society that meets once a week-“

“Now, wait a minute!”

He pushed the pamphlet into my hand. “I’m sure you’ll find it quite interesting. You seem to be an intelligent man with an open mind to the free exchange of ideas. I do believe you’ll find it very enlightening. Can I put you on our mailing list to receive our monthly newsletter listing all of our special events? The newsletter is only \$5.00 a week.”

“I thought you said it was monthly.”

“It is. It works out to \$21.50 a month, and well worth it. Or perhaps you would like to join other members on a mission to spread the good word?”

“Absolutely not! No! I’ve told you before I’m *not* interested.”

“But you said ‘I don’t know’. I just assumed-“

“No, please. I really have to go.”

“Let me just leave our brochure for you to read at your leisure. On page six, there is a fascinating article on Charles Darwin. Did you know, sir, that Darwin was a devout agnostic?”

“Really?!”

“Oh, yes. Many prominent scientists and philosophers have declared themselves agnostics. Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Bill Nye, and other science guys.”

He waited for a laugh that did not come, then continued.

“You know, according to some estimates, as much as 20% of the world’s population (over a billion) are non-religious, most being agnostics. Noam Chomsky – the notable social thinker – calls himself an agnostic, not to mention many famous writers – Kafka, Steinbeck, Joyce, Arthur Conan Doyle. There’s a list of well-known agnostics on page nine. You’ll be amazed to see who is part of our faith.”

I admit I was surprised by the names he cited. He mistook my reaction as a glimmer of interest.

“I also have for sale copies of Leslie Weatherhead’s landmark book ‘The Christian Agnostic’ for only \$30.00, plus tax.”

“No! Thank you!”

“You’ll also find the number and the website for the Agnostic Society on the back page if you want to join us, or if you have any questions. We’d be more than happy to answer any of your questions, ...if we can.”

I took the brochures in order to get rid of him. “I’m sure I won’t have any questions. Now, please!”

He took one step out of the doorway then turned to me again.

“Perhaps, if this is not the most convenient time for you, I could arrange to visit later in the week when we could devote more time to the faith of acknowledging the unknowable.”

“No!”

He nodded, unflustered. “Well, I trust you will read our material and find solace in the knowledge that, as Darwin puts it, “the mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us”.

“I’ll do that,” I replied sarcastically as I quickly slammed the door shut.

From the window, I watched him walk away and head to the next house, then swore, “Bloody agnostics!”