Atheist or Agnostic? Does It Matter?

by Herb Silverman

Many people tell me they wouldn't mind if I were an agnostic, but that I shouldn't be so arrogant as to be an atheist.

I used to call myself an agnostic because I could not logically prove whether a god exists, so I took the agnostic position that the existence of a god is unknown — and perhaps unknowable. I was without belief in any gods and thought it highly improbable that any supernatural beings exist. When I learned that this view is consistent with atheism (without a belief in any gods), I became an atheist.

So, my "conversion" from agnosticism to atheism was more definitional than theological. In reality, depending on how terms are defined and their context, I can accurately call myself an atheist or an agnostic, as well as a humanist, secular humanist, secular Jew, freethinker, skeptic, rationalist, infidel, and more.

I'm curious about why people find "atheist" so much more threatening than "agnostic" when self-described "atheists" and self-described "agnostics" often hold identical views about deities. As with atheists, agnostics almost never give equal merit to belief and disbelief. For instance, I can neither prove nor disprove the following:

Claim 1

The universe was created 10 minutes ago and its creator planted false memories in all of us.

Claim 2

Infidels who don't believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster are condemned to burn for eternity in a vat of hot pasta sauce.

I assume we are all "agnostic" about these two hypotheses, while quite certain that these claims are false. (I'd also call myself an atheist with respect to such claims.) The burden of proof is on the person making the assertion — as it should be with any supernatural claim.

I've seen and participated in a number of debates and discussions about whether God exists, and they often degenerate into playground disputes. The theist demands of the atheist, "Disprove God," while the atheist says to the theist, "Prove God." I'm sometimes told that I made my case for being an agnostic, not an atheist, because I didn't disprove God's existence. In future discussions and debates, I think I'll try the following different approach:

When Christians insist that I'm an agnostic and not really an atheist because I can't demonstrate with absolute certainty that there is no God, I will respond, "Can you demonstrate with absolute certainty that Jesus is Lord? If not, then you are an agnostic, not really a Christian." Perhaps these Christians (or those of other faiths) would then understand that such certainty is an almost impossible standard of knowledge. I'm willing to call myself an agnostic atheist if they'll call themselves agnostic Christians.

The word "proof" or "certainty" means different things to different people. It doesn't work for me when Christians say they have unquestionable faith in God because Jesus came into their hearts, just as it wouldn't work for them were I to say I have unquestionable knowledge that there is no God because no god ever came into my heart. The most I might say about faith is that I have faith in reason, the scientific method, and evidence— and the absence of evidence for any gods is why I'm an atheist.

Many people distrust atheists because atheists don't worry about rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The message that needs to get out is how many non-atheists live like atheists, for all practical purposes, without belief in a judging god involved in the workings of the world. This would include all deists, almost all Unitarians, and a lot of liberal religionists. This would also include many "nones," those who don't identify with any religion. Some "nones" may be religious, but a huge number of them are atheists, agnostics, or humanists who don't want to identify with any kind of label. I even think many politicians would be willing to make known publicly that their actions and policies have nothing to do with belief in an afterlife. It wouldn't surprise me if the category of "functional atheists," those who believe their actions in this life have nothing to do with how or whether they are treated in an afterlife, is larger than just about any religious denomination.

Theists aren't the only ones who argue about atheism versus agnosticism. I've heard atheists refer to agnostics as gutless or cowardly atheists. I've heard agnostics try to denigrate atheists by charging that they go out of their way to offend religious people. Adding humanists and secular humanists to the mix can further divide the nontheistic community. Atheists like to point out that religious belief should be treated as any other kind of belief open to criticism, and that unquestioned faith is a vice with inherent dangers, not a virtue to be respected. Atheists who prefer identifying as humanists would rather look for ways to make this world a better place than talk about gods in which they don't believe. They often try to find common bonds between theists and nontheists, and seek issues on which to cooperate. Atheists, agnostics, and humanists all try to be good without any gods, though humanists usually focus on "good" and atheists on "without any gods."

Here's an interesting distinction between Christians and secularists: Christians have the same unifying word but fight over theology, whereas secularists have the same unifying theology but fight over words. At least our wars are only rhetorical. Such "verbal" wars over terminology were

hilariously satirized in the *Life of Brian* movie, where people with common interests splintered into the Judean People's Front, the Judean Popular People's Front, and the People's Front of Judea — sometimes forgetting the name of their own group.

To move beyond terminological disputes, in 2002 I helped found the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), whose mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government. SCA now has 19 national member organizations, covering the full spectrum of atheists and humanists, including four nontheistic religious organizations. Since its member organizations are educational nonprofits with strict limits on lobbying, SCA incorporated as a political advocacy organization to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans. Fortunately, organizations in the Secular Coalition have stopped sparring over words and cooperate on the 95 percent their members have in common instead of arguing about the other 5 percent. We all disbelieve in the same gods and we want to be fruitful and multiply our community of reason.

My philosophy of life is based less on the Bible than on the title of an old soap opera (which I never watched): *One life to Live*. For atheists, agnostics, and humanists who believe life after death is a myth, the realization that this life is all we have encourages us to make the most of it in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. This usually requires that we help others to fulfill their needs, too.

Now, excuse me while I go out to find a good deed to do.

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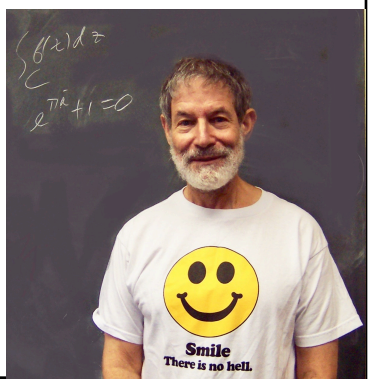
Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available through Amazon.com. Designating "The Freethought Society" as your AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.



Learning About Bahá'í Religious Beliefs

by Margaret Downey

A comparative religion course was required when I attended the Humanist Institute in New City, New York. There are approximately 4,300 religions worldwide, so studying each of them is not possible in a classroom setting and perhaps not possible in a lifetime. Consequently, the Humanist Institute's course required the reading of the book *The World's Religions* by **Huston Smith**. After reading it all the students confirmed that atheism was the most logical worldview.

I recently met a woman who was representing the Bahá'í community. I refreshed my knowledge of the philosophy and now share the following facts with readers of *The Freethought Society News*.

Bahá'í was founded in 1863 by imprisoned Persian nobleman Bahá'u'lláh after a revelation that he was actually a prophet foretold by the Báb — the founder of Bábism, and one of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'í seeks to unite humanity through oneness of religion, even though social laws have separated faith and government. Adherents believe in the oneness of God, religion; and humanity; promote harmony and fellowship; develop spiritually; and love God, who is all-powerful and all-loving. The Bahá'í religion is worldwide, especially in Asia and Africa.

The sacred text of Bahá'ís the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book)*. Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, written in Arabic around 1873 while he was still imprisoned within the city of 'Akká. It was supplemented by later writings and by Bahá'u'lláh's replies to a series of questions posed by one of his secretaries. The first authorized English translation was published in 1992, annotated and accompanied by the supplementary writings and the questions and answers.

Bahá'í's build 9-sided temples that are open to all. A 9-pointed star is a symbol of the Bahá'í religion. The Bahá'í calendar is 19 months of 19 days each — 4 extra days between the 18th and 19th months known as Ayyám-i-Há, which is a time of gift giving.

Followers of Bahá'í are allowed to vote, but cannot join a political party. Alcohol, drugs, gambling, gossip, and same gender marriage are prohibited. The Bahá'í teachings encourage reading and volunteer work. Also, adherents are expected to pray daily; make pilgrimages to Shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh (both in Israel); gather the first day of each 19-day month for the Nineteen Day Feast (a spiritual feast of worship, companionship, and unity); and daylight fasting for the 19-day month before Naw-Rúz (the Bahá'í New Year recognized at the Spring Equinox).

Bahá'í's pray for world unity and consider that goal as the final stage of humanity's evolution. War and violence is an unacceptable way to spread faith and they are proud to say that no variant sects of Bahá'í exist.