

My personal beliefs came up in my debate with Dinesh D'Souza that I posted last week, and I received several questions about how I classify myself: agnostic or atheist? I've talked about that on the blog a couple of times, but as I am constantly reminded, many of the people who are on the blog now were not on it a year or two ago, as there is turnover and our numbers continue to grow. And certainly no one (well, almost no one) goes back and reads everything from, say five years ago! So I thought it would be fine to repost my earlier comments. It was in response to a question I received back then, very similar to the questions I've received over the past week.

QUESTION:

If you don't think God exists, why do you refer to yourself as an agnostic? If this is your perspective, why not refer to yourself as an atheist? Could it be that you don't believe the Christian God exists, but are open to the possibility that some kind of higher power exists (this is my perspective) and this is why you call yourself agnostic?

ANSWER:

The first thing to say is that I had no idea how militant both atheists and agnostics could be about their labels, until I became an agnostic myself!

Before that, when I was a believer, I pretty much thought atheism and agnosticism were two amicably related positions, one saying that there is no God and the other saying that s/he doesn't know if there is a God. But when I became an agnostic, I started getting some very spirited emails from atheists who were incensed that I called myself an agnostic, as if I were being intellectually dishonest (that's not the case with the person who asks the question above - he is good spirited about it and just curious).

What I came to see is that many agnostics and many atheists think they have a corner on the truth. And they think the other side just won't come clean. In short, many atheists seem to think that agnostics are just wimpy atheists; and many agnostics seem to think that atheists are just arrogant agnostics. That is to say: atheists think that agnostics are afraid to follow the truth of their convictions; and agnostics think that atheists claim to know far more than they could possibly know.

I'm not sure that's the best way to think about the terms. For years I thought that an atheist was someone who said there was no God, and an agnostic was someone who said they didn't know. I've changed my mind about that in the past year or two. Now I think that "atheism" is a statement about faith and "agnosticism" is a statement about epistemology (the "science of knowledge").

If someone has a better way of explaining the terms, I'm open to it. But for now, for me, the way it works like this. An "atheist" is literally one who does not believe in a divine being. That is, s/he does not believe in God and so is "without God" (the literal meaning of the term).. An "agnostic" is one who says s/he does "not know" if there is a God (the literal meaning of that term; it's about knowledge, not faith). And so they are dealing with two incommensurate entities: faith (atheism) and knowledge (agnosticism).

When it comes to faith, I am an atheist. I don't believe in the traditional Judeo-Christian God (or in Zeus, Aphrodite, Hermes, Apollo, etc) (I sometimes believe in Dionysus/Bacchus, but that's another story...). But as to whether there is some greater spiritual power/intelligence in the universe, I'm agnostic. I don't know if any such being exists. And in my opinion, either does anyone else!

That means that I'm not sure what to call myself. I suppose I lean toward "agnostic" rather than "atheist" simply because as a scholar and professional thinker I am, at the end of the day, more interested in "knowledge" than "faith." Moreover, the term does seem to me to convey a greater sense of humility in the face of an incredibly awesome universe, about which I know so little. I happen to think that humility is a good thing in these circumstances. At the same time, I can understand why others may want to emphasize what they do not believe rather than what they do not know, and so call themselves atheist. (Why they are so incensed that I don't follow suit, however, continues to be a mystery to me.)



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