

In Theory: Agnosticism as a reasonable position

July 20, 2011

Q. Lawyer and author Vincent Bugliosi, who prosecuted Charles Manson and members of the Manson Family in 1971 for the Tate and LaBianca murders, will appear at Glendale Central Library on July 27 to discuss his new book, "Divinity of Doubt."

Bugliosi argues in the book that both religious believers and atheists are wrong and that agnosticism is the most responsible position to take with regard to the existence of God. Among points of discussion will be the "disturbing vengefulness" of God in the Old Testament, the decline of belief in evolution, and how an all-knowing Creator would allow humans free will, but do nothing to stop them persecuting and killing each other.

A review on religiondispatches.org takes Bugliosi to task for "treating agnosticism as nothing more than the recognition that when it comes to God's existence, we just don't know," and goes on to say: "Atheists and theists make the passionate leap, but agnostics refuse, and in so doing miss out on a crucial element of life."

Is agnosticism a valid way of looking at religious belief, or is it simply a way of sitting on the fence?

Answer:

Not having had the opportunity to read Vincent Bugliosi's book "Divinity of Doubt," I will make no attempt to critique it. What I will address is his idea of agnosticism as it is reflected in doubt. I believe that people misunderstand agnosticism when they see it as a static belief system that simply dismisses the reality of God, a priori. For an agnostic to say that he or she believes we cannot know for sure if there is or is not a God does not mean that the question is therefore irrelevant. It can, and often does, mean that we continue with integrity to struggle with the question.

A quote that I find very inspirational in this regard comes from author Anne Lamott in her book, "Plan B," in which she writes: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is." For me, her statement means that as people of faith, we must not believe that we have the only true answers, but must allow new understandings of religion and life to enter our thinking. When we close our minds to the possibility of fresh awareness, as some theists and atheists do, we cut ourselves off from the depths of understanding that doubt may reveal, and from people whose beliefs are different from ours.

I would like to share an excerpt from a reading by Rev. David Rankin in which he writes, "Doubt is the expression of faith in the intelligence and imagination of humanity. Doubt is the expression of humility about the capacity for errors and mistakes. Doubt is the expression of confidence that knowledge can always be improved. Doubt is the expression of hope that a better world is waiting for the future. Doubt is the expression of harmony with the unceasingly changing universe. It is not evil, but good, an intrinsic element of faith."

My hope is that we will continue our struggle with ideas about God and other religious concepts in ways that will enrich our dialogue with each other and our lives.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Agnosticism is nothing more than a vain attempt to shirk one's responsibility to acknowledge God and to serve him. Our word "agnostic" comes directly from the Greek language. "Gnosis" means knowledge, and the prefix "a" negates what follows, and means "not" or "without." So strictly speaking, the agnostic claims to be without knowledge whether God is there or not.

Is that the kind of person you look to for advice on serious matters? Would you keep going to a doctor, a lawyer or mechanic whose only answer for your problems is, "I don't know?" Probably not. The honest agnostic should say, "Don't buy my book, because I don't know."

Agnosticism's claim directly contradicts what God himself has revealed in the Bible, which addresses the "ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20).

If at this point in your life you honestly don't know whether God is there or not, following some simple biblical advice will help you. Carefully consider the wonders of creation, for they teach us that there is a Creator. Consider the moral laws of God (i.e. the Ten Commandments) and ask yourself if they really work in life. Psalm 34:8 encourages us to, "taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." James 4:8 says: "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." Jesus Christ invites us all: "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). If you're honestly willing to do these things, God will reveal himself personally to you.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

I just don't know. (Get it?)

Bugliosi's version of agnosticism (judging his book by its Amazon.com cover) seems to have more to do with rejecting theological doctrines than rejecting the premise of God.

In the face of the age-old conundrum of God's goodness vis-à-vis God's power in regard to human suffering, for instance, (either God is not good and therefore lets evil happen, or God is not powerful and can't prevent evil from happening), Bugliosi throws up his hands and says: Forget the whole thing, we'll never figure it out, so give up on the notion of God altogether.

I'd be more inclined to say: Forget pasting labels of all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, all-over God — experience proves we can't hold those three things together as an answer to the world and its sorrows. But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater — chuck the labels, keep God.

I don't think we have to give up on the idea that God exists; but maybe we've been asking the wrong questions about God. The love of God vs. the vengefulness of God, creationism vs. evolution, free will vs. sin — maybe they're just the wrong questions. Doesn't mean we have to chuck the whole enterprise of asking.

The humility of agnosticism has its place. Especially in this era of holy war and religious propaganda and oppression, a little less theological certainty all around might do the world a whole lot of good.

But the lazy despair of agnosticism — we can't possibly know, therefore why even try to ask — has always seemed sophomoric to me. You ask because the greatest questions in life are worth asking — especially the ones that don't have easy answers. If the answers were easy, they wouldn't be the great questions, would they? To paraphrase the film, "A League of Their Own," "If theology were easy, everyone would do it. It's the hard that makes it great."

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

I don't think that Bugliosi's — or anyone's — religious beliefs are subject to validity testing. I will say that agnosticism doesn't resonate with me personally, and I also don't get how responsibility enters into it.

It seems to me that you would know, or have a very strong suspicion, what you believe on the question of God(s), like you know whether you want chocolate or vanilla. (Please note, I regard ice cream as a pinnacle of human creativity, right up there with inventing the notion of the divine, so this comparison in no way disrespectful of religion.)

I admire Bugliosi's courage of his not-always popular convictions, backed with voluminous research. His book, "Reclaiming History," dismissed JFK assassination conspiracy believers as "kookier than a 3 dollar bill." The former prosecutor went far beyond many of us who thought there was a credible case for at least considering impeachment proceedings against George W. Bush for war crimes or abuse of his office.

This claim that God's existence is unknowable seems at odds with his seeming certainty about where he stands on everything else.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

Yes, Agnosticism is a way to view religion, but is it a valid way to do so? I leave the answer to that question to each individual reader of "In Theory."

Christianity is based on faith in things that are true but unseen. I believe that God lives and that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was resurrected, and through his grace we can be saved if we accept him. I believe that all who have lived on this Earth will have the opportunity in this life, or the next, to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to either accept or reject it. Is that a valid way to view religion? I can't prove my beliefs empirically.

In contrast, Stephen Hawking, in his book "The Grand Design," observed: "Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going."

For him, philosophy, and, for that matter, religion, are dead. Scientists have become the torch-bearers of

“discovery in our quest for knowledge.” Is that a valid way to view religion? He has empirical proof.

I respect the intellect of Mr. Hawking and his quest for a better understanding of the Universe, but for me, religion is not dead. Rather, science helps me better understand the marvelous workings of God, which discretely testify of him. That is why I read his books.

We each have the free agency to choose whether to believe, to not believe, or to sit on the fence, as it pertains to God. My choice is to believe, but I have to work on that each day. Sitting on the fence is not a viable option for me.

Likewise, Mr. Bugliosi has made his choice. I understand how he came to his conclusions and position. I won't criticize him for his choice. I would just encourage him to continue to seek the truth, which is an ongoing task for all of us, including myself.

Rick Callister
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
La Cañada Flintridge

When I was in seminary, a fellow student used to say that the most honest position regarding belief and non-belief was the agnostic position. That's probably true because the word agnostic is from the Greek, meaning “not to know.”

However, to believe or not to believe involves more than the head; it also involves the heart. Okay, you and I both know that the heart is nothing more than a pump, and the term “head” refers to the thinking and reasoning process. But when religious people and most others refer to the heart, they mean some sort of emotional commitment or feeling. So to be an agnostic, to be a person who doesn't know, is really to take on only half of the issue. To believe or not believe requires both head and heart. The agnostic, it seems to me, is only acting from the head.

So is being an agnostic sort of like sitting on the fence? I think it is. My advice is to get in or get out; fish or cut bait. There's a New Testament passage in which God says he doesn't like lukewarm. “I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3: 15-16, RSV).

Martin Luther had it right when he said, “If you sin, sin boldly.” So, come on, agnostics — show some guts. Believe or affirm unbelief. Anybody can sit there and say, “I just really don't know.”

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

While I would not go out of my way to criticize someone who is agnostic, I feel that agnosticism misunderstands the purpose of religion and the true essence of belief in God. An agnostic will argue that God is unknowable — and that is a fair point, since we are finite creatures and it is impossible for us to truly comprehend the infinite. At the same time, however, God has compassionately bestowed upon us free will, thus allowing us to control and govern our environment. That is the very reason why he does not intercede

when we persecute each other. Doing so would undermine our free will and reduce human beings to unthinking automatons.

Together with the immense power of free will, God has given us a code of morality — found within the Bible — and expects us to adhere to it. Of course we are not perfect, and there are times when our obedience falters.

The results of these shortcomings, even among religious believers, are unfortunate and can even be disastrous when we harm one another. But in all fairness, this phenomenon of cruelty or persecution is not unique to religious people. Let's not forget that the two greatest butchers in history, Hitler and Stalin, were anti-religious and did not take their ideas from the Bible.

My advice to Vincent Bugliosi when he promotes agnosticism is to be careful with what he wishes for. Statistics show that those who adhere to the Bible are far more charitable than others, since they follow a set of laws that demand kindness and benevolence. Yes, Biblical verses may sometimes be taken out of context, and — as I suspect Bugliosi himself has done — misunderstood. But we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Better to educate those who have a warped understanding of religious philosophy than to undermine religion as a whole, since spiritual principles and faith-based ethics have brought so much good and justice to our world.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

I've read reviews on "Divinity of Doubt" and I get the impression that Bugliosi isn't really saying anything new, and probably not saying it any better. It's yet another swipe at religion by someone who wishes to justify his position of indecision. He's a fence-sitter.

If Bugliosi were to stand before an ice cream counter and not conclude whether it was going to be strawberry or chocolate, he would not be having ice cream. You see, not deciding is tantamount to deciding. It's saying that there is a choice, but with something infinitely more important than ice cream, Bugliosi won't make it. He seems to have made up his mind in favor of evolution, though, and practically speaking, agnostics are atheists. They never live as Christians in their agnosticism.

There are people who come by their faith naturally, whose upbringing was church-ed and spiritually nurtured, but many of us came to Christ the hard way. We began as Bugliosi, but we searched, and we investigated various religious paths. We asked spiritual questions that we've long since forgotten, and in the days they found their answer, our doubts slowly eroded until faith became most reasonable. One must seek to find (Matthew 7:7).

Everyone wrestles with doubt at times, but at times our faith is also especially reinforced. This would be the case whether one was pro-Christ or anti-Christ, but the choice is all-important. If there is a God, and that God who served justice to evil societies in the Old Testament is the same God that demands allegiance today, then to deny or ignore him is akin to childishly pulling a blanket over our heads and pretending he can't touch us (all the while committing high treason by that free will Bugliosi disparages). What should God do with one like Bugliosi, who disobeys God, objects to God's manners, then evangelizes God's creatures with a deadly gospel of unbelief?

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the

living God” (Hebrews 3:12 NIV).

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose