

## REFLECTIONS ON AGNOSTICISM

March 18, 2007

I am indebted to some material I found from Richard Gilbert for inspiring me to sort of continue last month's sermon on Atheism with this one on Agnosticism.

Studs Terkel was once asked what he would call himself religiously: "My family is Jewish. I am a skeptic. A Transcendentalist? Emersonian? Maybe. Unitarian? But mostly I'm a skeptic. Well I guess mostly I'm a coward. If I weren't a coward, I might be an atheist, but I'm an agnostic. An agnostic is a cowardly atheist."

I have sometimes described myself as a "happy cynic". I'd also be fine with "joyous skeptic" or "cheerful agnostic". All of these seem almost oxymoronic. How can anyone be happy while expecting the worst from people, or joyous while filled with doubt, or cheerfully uncertain? Friends in more traditional religions seem calmly confident that God is there for them. They also assume that a doubter drags through life shuffling through despair. I've also said that being a cynic is good because you rarely meet with disappointment. I may not be ultimately certain of anything but I never go through a day without laughing out loud. Even days when I'm alone.

Robert Ingersoll once said, "I care nothing about the future world". That instead he intended "to make the best of this one." Well, I'm in no danger of being mistaken for Ingersoll. But I am mostly focused on having fun in this world and if I should someday find myself in some future existence I'll take a shot at having fun there too.

Agnostics do not take out celestial life insurance. They are more likely to live as if this life is all there is. Very little energy is spent on speculating on things unknowable except as sport. If there is some afterlife, I wonder who will be most surprised the atheists or the agnostics. Could it be the orthodox?

W. C. Fields, a lifelong agnostic, was found reading a Bible on his deathbed. He explained, "I'm looking for a loophole." I sometimes think that jokes like that just lend support to the believers, but only because they have no sense of humor, certainly no appreciation for the absurd.

Many agnostics seem amazingly chipper in their disinterest in the Eternal. Clearly it is possible to have a spirit that works without recourse to God. I don't know how a person brought up in a secure faith grows to reject it. Perhaps if it were possible to know, the answer would be as varied as those who make the change. I like the story that Leo Tolstoy, in his last hours rejected all the efforts of those who tried to convince him to reconcile with the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. He said, "Even in the valley of the shadow of death, two and two do not make six." (That would be a great line to remember just in case an opportunity to use it presents itself.)

Many think it reasonable that faced with their own death most atheists and agnostics would convert to something else. These people assume that grasping at a flimsy straw of what the person has seen as false hope will begin to look like an attractive option. For me, I factor in a large discount when considering a deathbed pronouncement which contradicts long held views.

First, why would statements made when a person's mental faculties are diminished outweigh earlier statements made when their mental powers were at their prime? Second, these deathbed changes are almost always reported by someone with a vested interest, or repeated by someone who wasn't even there, or both.

Kurt Vonnegut has said, "I'm all for church. I get letters from guys who have spent 20 years in prison who are afraid of going back into society. I tell them to join a church. I'm all for congregations. I'm all for people who find sanctuary in a church, I wish I could. But it's so hard for me to sit still in church. I can't stand to listen to ignorance or superstition. I am against someone reporting their latest message from God. See, I'm a Unitarian, and Unitarians don't know whether Christ was the Son of God or not. Frankly I get painfully bored in a Unitarian church."

Vonnegut hits with both fists. With one fist, he rebels against religion that smacks of the supernatural; he finds theological orthodoxy folly. With the other fist, he finds the agnosticism within Unitarian Universalism boring. Maybe Vonnegut can have it both ways, but I can't. I'll leave it to you to figure out which side I come down on.

When Clarence Darrow was defending John Scopes in 1925 for teaching evolutionary theory, the prosecution tried to discredit Darrow by labeling him an agnostic. Darrow replied, "I do not consider it an insult but rather a compliment to be called an agnostic. I do not pretend to know, where many ignorant men are sure." Perhaps another quote to save for an opportune moment.

These brief stories about agnostics are meant to suggest that a fundamentally agnostic stance is not necessarily a theological cop-out. The more I read from both the religious right and left, the more I feel that an agnostic position relative to Ultimate Reality suits me.

On the right we have Fundamentalism, let's just focus on Christian Fundamentalism, claiming that God has essentially whispered in their ear, commanding that they let people know that God has given them a corner on Truth. This ranges from the T. V. preacher who "Sells" God, to the average person who, not at all sure what God is tells pollsters that, nevertheless he or she is a believer.

On the left we have militant atheists who will salute almost any belief as long as it isn't Christian and not in the Bible. They are as sure there isn't a God as the rightists are that there is. At G.A. year before last I attended a meeting where people were offended when asked "What God they didn't believe in." They didn't believe in all Gods and knew they didn't without further discussion. I'm fine with no further discussion. (And yes! That means I have dismissed them without further study or interest.) The two sides at one level are diametrically opposed, but on another they are exactly alike. Dogmatism - right or left - is still dogmatism (probably should be capitalized) and I'm not interested in either version.

I have a lot more to be humble about than the average person but the more religious humility seems appropriate during theologically cocky days. Religious modesty seem called for when surrounded by vain intolerance. I call for more quiet doubt in the midst of theological noise. There is nobility, of sorts, in the courage to announce "I don't know" when everyone else seems

to know exactly.

It is interesting to me that the term "agnostic" was coined at almost the same time as *Origin of Species* was first published and as "historical criticism" began to be applied to Bible study (the Bible seen as a human work not dictated directly from God). The stage was set for skepticism and the word "agnostic" quickly passed into common usage.

The author of one of our readings, the historian James Turner, in *Without God, Without Creed* describes this fall from faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "Agnosticism did not drive faith from the field, but it became a viable theological option to it."

For Deists, such as Thomas Jefferson and most of our founding fathers, God had become a cosmic engineer or a clock maker. They had lost confidence in the Biblical God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul and had doubts which wouldn't go away. Their God designed the laws of Nature. The popular image is of a Creator who wound up the clock of the universe and set it to running like a great cosmic machine which didn't need further attention.

This God didn't catch on among people who needed a more personal relationship. It is difficult to gain any uplift by praying to a natural law. In reaction to this austere Deism, the poet, Matthew Arnold came up with two interesting definitions of religion. "Faith is the poetry of life." and "Religion is morality tinged by emotion."

The morality of God was challenged for the first time in an organized way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How could a good God allow slavery, urban poverty, the waste of war, the capricious violence of natural calamities. This humanism couldn't abide a God who just tossed souls into eternal fire without regard to merit or demerit. This remains a serious problem, perhaps more so now than then.

No moral God would/could allow such human suffering. Agnostic morality, which was and is behaviorally like the Christian morality it replaced, was grounded in human nature not God. The collective wisdom of fallible humans replaced the infallible wisdom of God. Not much changed except that the Agnostics felt better about themselves. As Emerson said "As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where man the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins."

As evolution and natural selection became acceptable God's judgment and efficiency came into question. Why this tedious and messy process? Why would a clever and benign God allow the survival of the fittest? Or as Ingersoll said, "I have some trouble in regarding evil as having been intended by infinite Goodness."

The whole God issue is really about the difference between the desirability of a belief and the evidence for the belief. Trying to treat an un-provable hope as a fact just chases truth out the door and locks it behind. This very sketchy foray into Agnosticism is meant to suggest that religion is more about what we don't know than what we do know. Some people give a name to what we don't know - God. Other people just don't name what they don't know. This second group of people are the Agnostics.

In the early 90's *Newsweek* Proclaimed that Unitarian Universalism was the "quintessential religion of the 90's." Remember that? So, how can people remain skeptical before the ultimate reality of existence? Can a group with enough religious humility to admit that it does not know ultimate truth survive? Well, the jury is still out on that one, but on this question the jury will always be out. How could there be a final resolution on survival? We have managed to hang in there for more than a decade and a half since the article. I am taking that as good news. Not proof, but good news.

I have another light bulb question - "How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?"

Three. One to screw in the bulb, one to hold the ladder, and one to moderate the discussion that is sure to develop about the bulb's place in the universe.

That joke may have more truth than humor. It is characteristic of our small group of religious people. We have a very diverse range of theological views - The atheists and agnostics, the theists, of many types, the deists, the variety of pantheists and humanists, the miscellaneous groups that I missed; one of the major things which hold us together is the fascination each of us hold for the open mind and the open-ended universe.

My own religious upbringing was nominally Protestant, although I had no idea what Protestants were protesting. My family didn't even attend church on Christmas and Easter. Pretty much my only memory of religion being mentioned at home was belittling my grandmother's "Holy Rollerism". Sometimes in the summer I would attend a summer program for kids at a nearby church. (not every summer and not the same church) Nancy was a serious Baptist and I hung with her. We were married in her Baptist church. My reading after college was leading me to really enjoy the role of "village atheist" among those friends who were more conventionally devout. Then we found a Unitarian Church (just before merger) and I was home. My smugly superior atheism gradually diminished or was less important until seminary, where it disappeared as I began to take other people's religious positions seriously, both intellectually and emotionally. My big struggle now is being too open. Sometimes I wonder if I ultimately stand for anything.

I respect the deeply held, and thought about, God beliefs of people who do not share all of my liberal religious perspective. I appreciate much of the rich diversity within UUism as we struggle with the question. I am in no danger of coming to despair over my limited knowledge. I am happy, and will remain so as long as my mind is quick enough to notice and appreciate the humor that is all around me. I laugh a lot more than I cry and enjoy it more. I'm aware that sometimes my attempts at humor fall short, okay WAY short, But those moments when just the right cord is struck will tide me over those rough spots.

My own journey has gone from indifferent to religion, to mildly curious intellectually, to aggressively scoffing, to serious interest, to cheerful, happy agnosticism.

The author of our other reading, science fiction writer, Graham Dunstan Martin writes, "True believers are orthodox. Real believers are inquiring heretics. 'True believers' feel awe at the grandeur of their own thoughts. Real believers feel awe at the immensity of the unknown. Dogma thinks it knows. Belief knows that it does not. Dogma is credulous. Belief is skeptical,

but forever open-minded."

I look forward to your skepticism.

Amen!