

Isn't Agnosticism the only intellectually honest position?

Jesus College Chapel

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Genesis 1:24-31

Mark 1:4-11

A man goes into a confessional box and says, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I'm an eighty-four year old man, and I'm dating a 21-year-old with magnificent breasts!"

"Well, that's not really a sin," the priest assures him.

"But I got her pregnant," says the old man.

"Okay, I can see that's serious," says the priest. "Sex outside of marriage is forbidden for Catholics."

"Oh, I'm not a Catholic," says the man – "I'm an agnostic."

"So ... why are you telling me all this?" asks the somewhat flustered priest.

To which the agnostic replies, "Well, I'm telling everyone. Wouldn't you?"

It seems like I am not the only person to find agnosticism attractive. Agnosticism is a position that takes our finitude with the utmost seriousness. Given that all human beings who've ever lived – together know less than, say, a billionth of a per cent of all that there is to know, how can we possibly pontificate with confidence on matters that are, by definition, beyond the possibility of observation, such as the existence or otherwise of God?

Given that *science* is constantly subjecting its own observations, hypotheses and methodologies to scrutiny, and constantly revising them in the light of new evidence: and given that *history* is constantly questioning itself and revising itself and indeed critiquing the attitudes and assumptions that historians bring to their study; how can Christians dare to found their whole faith on a one-off historical event that is claimed to have happened two thousand years ago? But then to urge us to base our whole lives on that claimed event, isn't that asking more of us than we would be epistemologically warranted in accepting?

Having said that, is it not almost as over-confident of the atheist to deny out of hand the possibility of such an event having happened? Given the complexity and the sheer strangeness of reality as it has been revealed to us by the physical sciences, is it epistemologically warranted to pronounce dogmatically that no such event can have taken place, to claim to be able to prove a negative? Isn't that to come to history with philosophical preconceptions and preconditions of the very sort that an open-minded historical enquirer should keep revisable?

Add to that the fact that Agnosticism is not tainted in the way religion is by its inquisitions and its forcible conversions, nor is it tarnished in the way atheistic ideologies are by their Gulags and their Laogais – and it is hard to resist the

balanced, moderate and intellectually humble attractions of this position.

It used to be said of Oxford chaplains that they dispense sherry and agnosticism in equal proportions. Well, I gather that there *is* sherry on offer after this service, but I'm afraid that, despite its attractions, I sha'n't be dispensing any agnosticism during this service. And I want for the rest of my time this evening to explain why, despite its huge attractiveness, I don't in the end believe that agnosticism is sustainable.

And by 'sustainable', I mean *existentially* sustainable. It is sustainable intellectually, but not existentially. You can remain intellectually undecided, but you cannot remain existentially undecided. You either live as if God exists or you live as if He doesn't. Your *mind* may not come down on one side or the other, but your life will. You either pray and go to public worship and belong to a worshipping community and attempt to shape your life by the tenets, aims and values of a particular religious tradition – or you don't. Indeed, the way you live your life may say more about what you believe deep down than do your attempted verbal articulations.

Imagine you are diagnosed with some terminal disease and given only a couple of years to live. And suppose that the specialist you are seeing offers you a newly developed operation that offers some hope of a long-term cure. You may be very uncertain about whether it is a risk worth taking. You may feel that you don't have enough information to make a

fully-informed decision. You may indeed feel that there *isn't* enough information to make a fully-informed decision on whether to submit to the operation or not. But one way or another you will make a decision. You will either have that operation or not have it. Not making a decision is effectively to make a decision.

And that, I suggest, is the situation with the question of God, and with the issue of Christian faith in particular. Here is a way of being which claims that it constitutes a cure for our mortality. We are either going to submit to that putative treatment or we are not. And however intellectually undecided we may be, we will make a decision with our lives.

On what basis, then, should we make that decision?

Obviously, a careful examination of the evidence and the arguments on each side cannot be avoided, and people will weigh the strength of that evidence and those arguments differently. If you think that the evidence and the arguments point strongly (if not conclusively) in the atheist direction, then you will probably decide to live that way – unless and until some evidence or some experience makes you reconsider. And if you think, as I do, that the evidence and the arguments are strongly (if not conclusively) supportive of a Christian take on life, then you will probably decide to live accordingly – while remembering that all knowledge is provisional and revisable.

But what if you find the evidence and the arguments to be equally balanced? To be finely poised? What then?

One of my favourite columns in *Private Eye* is the 'Dumb Britain' column, which simply reports some of the answers given by contestants on quiz shows. Here are some of the most impressive entries:

Anne Robinson: Which two brothers, whose names begin with R, were the legendary founders of Rome?

Contestant: The Wright Brothers?

Anne Robinson: In history, the first two Norman kings who ruled England in the latter part of the eleventh century both had which first name?

Contestant: Norman.

Phil Wood: What 'k' could be described as the Islamic Bible?

Contestant: Er ...

Phil: It's got two syllables. Kor ...?

Contestant: Blimey?

It's easy to mock, but I don't know very much, either.

I don't know the capital of Bolivia.

I don't know the dates of the Hundred Years' War.

I don't know where all the information on the internet is stored.

I don't know how consciousness works.

I don't know very much.

What I do know is that love is the most important thing in the world; that it is being loved that brightens one's whole being and enables one to flourish; that loving and being loved is the difference between existing and living.

And I know that far more certainly than I know the date of the battle of Hastings or the latest scientific theory; because some new document may force us to revise the date of the battle of Hastings, and some new experiment may force us to revise the latest scientific theory. But what new fact could cause us to revise our deep intuition that love is the most important thing in life, that love is how we should live, and love is what we should live for?

The problem, of course, is that, though love is the most important thing in the world, it doesn't seem to be the most prevalent. It is in fact a reasonably recent arrival onto the cosmic stage. It is an evolutionary by-product that tricks us into perpetuating the species (romantic love) and protecting

the next generation until it is capable of looking after itself (parental love).

If you look at the *past*, love seems to be a bit of a cosmic johnny-come-lately.

If you look at the *present*, love seems often to be swamped by hatred and violence.

If you look at the *future*, well, entropy will ultimately put paid to all loving.

So love seems recent, fragile and doomed.

Unless you take into account the vision at Jesus' baptism, which we had as our second lesson this evening. The vision at Jesus' baptism lifts the veil on what is going on at the heart of reality. And what is going on at the heart of reality is love.

'You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.'
(In that South London street slang, 'well-pleased'!)

What is at the heart of reality, says this passage and the whole religious tradition of which it is a part – what is at the heart of reality is a relationship of love given and love received, between the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

If that is true, then love is not a recent thing, but the first thing, the last thing, the eternal thing – that which has always been and will always be.

If what is at the heart of reality is a relationship of love within the being of God, then love is not a by-product – it is the point of the whole thing.

If what is at the heart of reality is a relationship of love, then love is not a misfiring – it is what we are for.

If what is at the heart of reality is the loving relationship between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, then love is not doomed – it is that which will outlast all hatred, all violence, all conflict, all loss.

Personally, I find the arguments and the evidence for Christian faith compelling. But if I didn't, I would take my stand, I would place my weight on the position that best grounded my deepest intuitive value. I would trust myself to the world-view that best grounded the most fundamental of human insights. I would not take to my heart any system of thought that makes love incidental. I would give in to the gravitational pull of a philosophy that makes the richest and most ennobling thing in life central and not peripheral, eternal and not ephemeral. I would wager my life's journey on a system in which love is our origin, love is our *raison d'être*, and love is our destiny.

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