**Agnosticism**

**World Religion**

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**Agnosticism**

Agnosticism is the view that the [truth values](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_value) of certain claims – especially [metaphysical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics) and [religious](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion) claims such as [whether God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existence_of_God), the [divine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divinity), or the [supernatural](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural) exist – are unknown and perhaps [unknowable](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty).

According to the philosopher [William L. Rowe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_L._Rowe), "agnosticism is the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist." Agnosticism is a [doctrine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine) or set of [tenets](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/tenet) rather than a religion as such.

**Defining Agnosticism:**

Agnosticism is of the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe. Consequently Agnosticism puts aside not only the greater part of popular theology, but also the greater part of anti-theology. On the whole, the "bosh" of heterodoxy is more offensive to me than that of orthodoxy, because heterodoxy professes to be guided by reason and science, and orthodoxy does not.

*— Thomas Henry Huxley*

To further explain, agnostics are those who are unsure if there is a God or other spiritual presences. They believe that there is a possibility to all religions being right or none of them.

Most recently, the terms [apathetic and pragmatic agnosticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apatheism) have been coined with regard to the view that there is no proof of either the existence or non-existence of any deity, but since any deity that may exist appears unconcerned for the universe or the welfare of its inhabitants, the question is largely academic and that their existence therefore has little to no impact on personal human affairs and should be of little theological interest.

**History:**

Agnostic thought, in the form of [skepticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_skepticism), emerged as a formal philosophical position in [ancient Greece](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greece). Its proponents included [Protagoras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protagoras), [Pyrrho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrrho), [Carneades](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carneades), [Sextus Empiricus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sextus_Empiricus)and, to some degree, [Socrates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates), who was a strong advocate for a skeptical approach to [epistemology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology).

[Pyrrho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrrho) said that we should refrain from making judgment as we can never know the true reality. According to Pyrrho, having opinion was possible, but certainty and knowledge are impossible. [Carneades](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carneades) was also a skeptic in relation to all knowledge claims. He proposed a probability theory, however. According to him, certainty could never be attained. [Protagoras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protagoras) rejected the conventional accounts of the gods. He said:

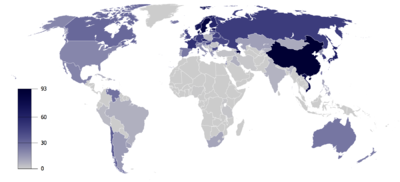
“Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.”

Agnostic views are as old as [philosophical skepticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_skepticism), but the terms agnostic and agnosticism were created by [Huxley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Henry_Huxley) to sum up his thoughts on contemporary developments of metaphysics about the "unconditioned" ([William Hamilton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_William_Hamilton,_9th_Baronet)) and the "unknowable" ([Herbert Spencer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer)). Though Huxley began to use the term "agnostic" in 1869, his opinions had taken shape some time before that date. In a letter of September 23, 1860, to [Charles Kingsley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Kingsley), Huxley discussed his views extensively:

“I neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man. I see no reason for believing it, but, on the other hand, I have no means of disproving it. I have no *a priori* objections to the doctrine. No man who has to deal daily and hourly with nature can trouble himself about *a priori* difficulties. Give me such evidence as would justify me in believing in anything else, and I will believe that. Why should I not? It is not half so wonderful as the conservation of force or the indestructibility of matter...”

Raised in a religious environment, [Charles Darwin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin) studied to be an Anglican clergyman. While eventually doubting parts of his faith, Darwin continued to help in church affairs, even while avoiding church attendance. Darwin stated that it would be "absurd to doubt that a man might be an ardent theist and an evolutionist". Although reticent about his religious views, in 1879 he wrote that "I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. – I think that generally ... an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind."

**Demographics:**



**Percentage of Atheists/Agnostics across the world**

[Demographic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic) researches normally do not differentiate between different types of non-religious participants, so agnostics are often classified in the same category as [atheists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism) or other [non-religious](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irreligion) people.

A study conducted by the [Pew Research Center](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pew_Research_Center) found that about 16% of the world's people, the third largest group after [Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity) and [Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam), have no religious affiliation. According to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center, agnostics made up 3.3% of the US adult population. In the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, conducted by the Pew Research Center, 55% of agnostic respondents expressed "a belief in God or a universal spirit", whereas 41% stated that they thought that they felt a tension "being non-religious in a society where most people are religious".

**Criticism:**

Theistic critics claim that agnosticism is impossible in practice, since a person can live only either as if God did not exist, or as if God did exist.

Religious scholars such as Laurence B. Brown criticize the misuse of the word agnosticism, claiming that it has become one of the most misapplied terms in metaphysics. Brown raises the question, "You claim that nothing can be known with certainty ... how, then, can you be so sure?"

According to [Pope Benedict XVI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Benedict_XVI), strong agnosticism in particular contradicts itself in affirming the power of reason to know scientific [truth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth). He blames the exclusion of reasoning from religion and ethics for dangerous pathologies such as crimes against humanity and ecological disasters. "Agnosticism", said Ratzinger, "is always the fruit of a refusal of that knowledge which is in fact offered to man ... The knowledge of God has always existed". He asserted that agnosticism is a choice of comfort, pride, dominion, and utility over truth, and is opposed by the following attitudes: the keenest self-criticism, humble listening to the whole of existence, the persistent patience and self-correction of the [scientific method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_method), a readiness to be purified by the truth.

The [Catholic Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church) sees merit in examining what it calls "partial agnosticism", specifically those systems that "do not aim at constructing a complete philosophy of the unknowable, but at excluding special kinds of truth, notably religious, from the domain of knowledge". However, the Church is historically opposed to a full denial of the capacity of human reason to know God. The [Council of the Vatican](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_the_Vatican) declares, "God, the beginning and end of all, can, by the natural light of human reason, be known with certainty from the works of creation".

[Blaise Pascal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blaise_Pascal) argued that even if there were truly no evidence for God, agnostics should consider what is now known as [Pascal's Wager](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_Wager): the [infinite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infinity) expected value of acknowledging God is always greater than the finite expected value of not acknowledging his existence, and thus it is a safer "bet" to choose God.

[Peter Kreeft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Kreeft) and Ronald Tacelli cited 20 arguments for God's existence,asserting that any demand for evidence testable in a laboratory is in effect asking God, the Supreme Being, to become man's servant.

However according to [Richard Dawkins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dawkins), a distinction between agnosticism and atheism is unwieldy and depends on how close to zero a person is willing to rate the probability of existence for any given god-like entity. About himself, Dawkins continues, "I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden." Dawkins also identifies two categories of agnostics; "Temporary Agnostics in Practice", and "Permanent Agnostics in Principle". Dawkins considers temporary agnosticism an entirely reasonable position, but views permanent agnosticism as "fence-sitting, intellectual cowardice".