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Are you
100%
sure you
want to be
an agnostic



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The Agnostic Diagnostic

Please take a few moments to complete the questionnaire over the page before you begin, rating each of the statements on the scale below.

1 Strongly agree	2 Agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Disagree	5 Strongly disagree
I regularly carry a placard around central London with this slogan.	I smile weakly at people carrying a placard with this slogan.	'Meh.'	I smile politely when someone expresses this opinion while inwardly despising them.	If someone expresses this opinion in my presence, I can't guarantee their safety.

ARE YOU 100% SURE YOU WANT TO BE AN AGNOSTIC?

- The Battle of Hastings took place in the year 1066.
- The universe created itself without any help from God (who doesn't exist).
- The teachings of Jesus and Muhammad are equally good for society.
- There is no such thing as absolute truth.
- Torture is absolutely wrong.
- Jesus defeated death and is alive today.
- More people should be vegans.
- My conclusions about Jesus are based on sufficient investigation.
- I'm 100% sure I want to be an agnostic.

In God We Doubt?

There's a joke doing the rounds at the moment that arguably isn't the best way to begin a book, because it doesn't work written down. But here goes anyway...

People in our society are becoming more religious. Most of them are nuns. When you ask them what religious beliefs they hold, they answer, 'Nun.' (Or actually they say, 'None,' which is why the joke only makes sense spoken out loud.) Ha ha ha.

Perhaps that's you, as you pick up this little paperback. You're a 'none'.

You're not a nihilist – theirs is the bleak philosophy that says there's no truth and no meaning and nothing matters. That's not you. You don't believe in *nothing* that much.

You're not an atheist – theirs is the belief (!) that there is no God, and everything we see

came about purely by chance, and human beings are nothing but ‘survival machines’,¹ and human thoughts are no more than the movement of electrons and fluctuations in the concentration of neurotransmitters, and we are hurtling through space with no ultimate destiny besides the heat death of the universe. Personally, you’re not that confident in God’s non-existence.

You’re not a fundamentalist. In fact you’re quite concerned when people are committed to something so passionately that they are willing to die for it (and might, in some cases, kill others for it). Enthusiasts can be exclusive. Dogmatism is dangerous. Creeds can be cruel. Believers can be blinkered. Anything can be alphabetised. You are wary of the excesses of any belief system.

You prefer to identify as a humble agnostic. You’re just not sure. You’re not saying anyone is totally wrong, but neither are you prepared to say anyone has got it 100% right. In the Agnostic Diagnostic, you consistently scored somewhere in the middle. You want to be honest with yourself and with everyone else and hold up your hand and say, ‘I just don’t know.’

Agnosticism is on the rise. Wikipedia maintains a 'List of Agnostics', which includes the authors Franz Kafka and Matt Groening (of *Simpsons* fame); the tycoons Elon Musk and Warren Buffett; the actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Charlie Chaplin; the philosophers Noam Chomsky and David Hume; the scientists Marie Curie and Charles Darwin.² However, few have written explicitly in defence of their agnosticism. An exception is the broadcaster John Humphrys, who in 2008 published his book *In God We Doubt*:

So my own spiritual journey – if that's not too high-falutin' a notion – has taken me from my childish Big Questions to my ultimate failure to find any corresponding Big Answers. Along the way I have experienced the indoctrination of confirmation classes, the anticlimax of the Eucharist, the futility of prayer, the contradiction between the promises made by an allegedly merciful, loving God and the reality of a suffering world. So I end up – so far, at any rate – as a doubter.³

Maybe you, like Humphrys, have had a religious upbringing or passed through a spiritual phase, but find that it no longer satisfies. Or perhaps you have always seen yourself as neutral. Possibly you'd quite like to believe in something out there, but you're not willing to commit unthinkingly. The comedian Marcus Brigstocke puts it well:

The truth, as I see it, is that I would rather stay in a place of confusion amongst similar restless souls shuffling about in the hope there might be a sign pointing in one direction or another, than leap aboard whichever bandwagon looks like it's got some momentum behind it and a confident driver. We might find God. We should probably have a plan for that in case we startle Him and He goes for us. I don't mind if we don't find Him. I'd be just as happy to discover that whatever road this is that I'm on, I'm not walking it alone.⁴

Whatever your starting point, you're open-minded enough to have started a book that aims (we may as well be up front about this)

to persuade you to abandon your agnosticism. Thanks. We want to reassure you at the outset that we are not into blind faith; we are into evidence, history, joy, forgiveness, truth, eternal life and honest self-reflection. We think some of what we have to share will surprise you. And we even dare to hope that by the end you won't be so sure that you are unsure.

I (Andrew) was once an agnostic myself, and this is the sort of book I wish someone had put into my hands as a confused teenager. I can sympathise with your questions, your indifference, your irritation, your fears. I'm pleased now to be a Christian and to have the opportunity to share how I got there.

I (Jon) have had many, many conversations with sceptics. This book contains the things, in hindsight, I wish I'd said.

In lieu of a contents page, here's an outline of the journey we hope you'll let us take you on. In 'What Kind of Agnostic Are You Anyway?' we discover that not all doubters are alike. In 'Meet the Truth', we consider the kind of evidence that convinced a bloke called John that his mate had created the universe. In 'Blind

Men Are Sometimes the Best Eyewitnesses!’ we look in detail at one of Jesus’ most famous miracles – and a first-century attempt to debunk it. In ‘The Curious Case of Mr P’, I (Andrew) talk about the time I was arrested, and we draw parallels between the British justice system and the weighing of biblical claims. In ‘Even More Syllogisms (for the Enthusiast)’, we apply ruthless logic to subjects like the Big Bang, the problem of suffering and the mystery of the Trinity. In ‘It’s Dangerous to Remain Agnostic’, we explore why sitting on the fence is not in fact a neutral option. In ‘Who’s Playing Hide-and-Seek?’ we turn the tables on the popular notion that God is elusive. In ‘We Write This to Make Our Joy Complete’, we tell the story of a phoney preacher whose faith, in the end, became authentic.

What Kind of Agnostic Are You Anyway?

The word *agnosticism* comes from the Ancient Greek *gnosis*, meaning ‘knowledge’. The *a* at the start of the word just means ‘not’. We say something is ‘atypical’ when it is not typical. Or ‘asymmetrical’ when it’s not symmetrical. You could call a vegetarian an ‘acarnivore’ or someone who doesn’t like bagpipes, ‘aScottish’. If *gnosis* is about knowing, then agnosticism simply means not knowing.⁵

It is helpful to distinguish three types of agnosticism.

Type 1 is when something is knowable but you yourself don’t know it. So, for example, I (Andrew) could say that ‘I am agnostic about the neurological basis of ventriloquism – whether the brain mechanisms that determine a sound’s