

Agnosticism

The term 'agnostic' (from the Greek *gnostikos*, one who knows, with the prior 'a' that functions as a negative), from which the term 'agnosticism' is derived, was coined by the English scientist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), a biologist and zoologist. He supported Darwin's theory of evolution and took it on himself to promote its diffusion, defending it through energetic polemics against its opponents. With this 'agnostic' he intended to define his own theological position, which is to say the idea that it is impossible for the human mind either to affirm or deny the existence of a metaphysical reality and in particular, of religious realities and the existence of God. Naturally, analogous positions can be found throughout the history of Western philosophical thought, from Antiquity on, from Protagoras to Pyrrho and Carneades, and, in general, in sceptical currents of thought – not to mention the many expressions, even in religious context, of the notion of the incapacity of man to attain to knowledge of the divine. In any case, in relation to the modern and contemporary world, one can bring under the heading of 'agnosticism' the various approaches of writers on the topic, who represent different positions in the spectrum of views of it. It is therefore proposed to offer a series of definitions which can serve as a useful yardstick for understanding the range of these positions, even if one can find, within writings of the same author, complex complex notions which cannot be neatly categorised. One can at least distinguish two main points of view once the concept we are examining is distinguished from atheism, in the sense of a positive denial of the existence of God, though in some cases the two ideas may converge. Taking it for granted that the ultimate verities are unknowable, some agnostic authors do in fact call themselves atheists, in that they are personally convinced that God does not exist ('atheistic' agnostics), while others admit that they do believe in an unknowable absolute, though they say that they are just incapable of proving it (these are 'theistic' agnostics). It is therefore evident that in this case the dialectic between faith and reason is called into question, and, moreover, any possibility of reconciling them denies. These assumptions, in their turn, are sometimes affirmed in an extreme form, with an absolute denial of the capacity of human reason to attain to the knowledge of a reality which is not empirically verifiable, while sometimes there is a recognition that future data may be found which leads to such a knowledge. Here one can distinguish between a 'strong' and a 'weak' agnosticism. To give a couple of quick examples from the wide range of positions influenced by agnosticism, one may mention two thinkers prominent in this context, namely the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who was at the centre of the philosophical, socio-political cultural and scientific controversy sparked off by Darwinism, and the English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), who was also a mathematician and sociologist, as well as being deeply involved in the politics of his day, as a brilliant publicist and controversialist. Spencer, in proclaiming a doctrine of 'cosmic evolution', which extrapolated from the biological level to reality as a whole, in his 'system of synthetic philosophy', the first volume of which is called *First Principles*, declares on the one hand that the essence of reality is unknowable, but, on the other hand, admits that religion, which seeks to penetrate into this unknowable, can be compatible with science. On the other hand he privileges, in this work, those religious phenomena which stress in

one way or another the difficulty if not impossibility of man reaching knowledge of the divine, and which develop forms of negative theology, insisting, in consequence, on the mysterious character of the ultimate reality. In any case he considers that even if religious dogmas are impossible to prove, they contain hints of the truth, and, above all, he admits the existence of an unknowable 'Absolute', beyond empirical reality, leaving space too for faith in this absolute. Bertrand Russell, on the basis of an equally systematic agnostic position, was explicitly atheist, indeed a protagonist of what is called 'militant atheism', and repeatedly made clear in his writings his absolute rejection of religious values and conviction that they held back the progress of social and cultural life; he declared that was a 'rationalist', and 'not a Christian'.

The Church did not fail to take a firm position against the various forms of agnosticism within positivist thought; at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) the Church formulated an indirect but explicit condemnation of every form of agnosticism, with its denial of the capacity of human reason to achieve knowledge of God. The Constitution *Dei Filius* reaffirmed some fundamentals of the Catholic Faith: 1) there is one true, personal God, the providential creator; 2) knowledge of God's existence is attainable through reason, though revelation is necessary; 3) faith is a gift of God and at the same time a free choice of human will; 4) faith and reason are distinct but complementary orders. At the same time, in the first canon *De revelatione*, those who affirm that the light of human reason cannot know *One true God, our Creator and Lord*, with certainty (*certo cognosci non posse*). The entire magisterium of the Church has reaffirmed this position up to our own time. The teaching of pope Benedict XVI has done so with particular emphasis.

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