

# I Do Not Know: How Christian Educators can Help Agnostic Students

*by A Referensi*

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## **I Do Not Know:** ***How Christian Educators can Help Agnostic Students***

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### ABSTRACT

A growing number of Indonesian young people, both on campuses and social media, are identifying as agnostics. However, many do so without fully understanding what agnosticism means, often seeing it as an anti-mainstream alternative to atheism. This trend presents a challenge for educators, particularly in Christian schools and universities, who must engage with these students effectively. In the Indonesian context, this issue is further complicated by Pancasila, which upholds belief in God as national ideology. This essay uses recent literature to introduce the basic tenets of agnosticism, identify types of agnosticism, and offer educators practical strategies – from theology, philosophy, and psychology – to foster deeper understanding of this issue in schools.

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2023 speech, Indonesian President Joko Widodo cited an IPSOS Global Religion survey, which revealed that 29% of the world's population identifies as agnostic or atheist (Yanwardhana, 2023). In contrast to the global trend, the president pointed to a Pew Research Center finding that claims 98% of Indonesians consider religion to be very important in their lives (Miner, 2023). However, facts often differ from statistics. There is a rise of Indonesian youth claiming to be agnostics in public safe space like campus (Setyawan, 2019; Ilham, 2022) and online platforms.

Coki Pardede, a well-known Indonesian comedian and self-proclaimed agnostic, has garnered significant attention following his YouTube interview on agnosticism (Daniel Mananta Network, 2021). Many netizens view him as an honest seeker or a spiritual pilgrim, grappling with ultimate questions. In the interview, Coki admitted that he feels much safer identifying as an agnostic rather than an atheist. Indeed, Indonesian political ideology, *Pancasila*, places *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*—belief in God—to be the first *sila* (principle). This principle permeates the country's legal system and manifests in various laws, ensuring that religious affiliation is a central part of civic life. For instance, the Indonesian Marriage Law mandates that marriages are only valid if performed by religious institutions of the bridegroom, putting religious-disaffiliated citizens in tough situation (Nababan, 2023).

In addition, Article 156a of the Penal Code and Article 302 of the newly enacted Criminal Code (UU 1/2023) criminalize the public promotion of atheism or agnosticism, especially if done with the intent of persuading others to abandon their religious beliefs (Permana, 2019). These laws illustrate the country's commitment to preserving religious values in the public sphere, imposing penalties of up to five years imprisonment or significant fines for violations (Permana, 2019).

Given this legal and political background, it becomes clear why Indonesia appears, on statistics above, not following global trends in religious disaffiliation. The country's emphasis on religion as a core part of national identity, coupled with legal constraints on promoting irreligious beliefs, may explain why Indonesia maintains a high percentage of religious adherence, as reflected in official statistics. Surely, this makes the job of Christian higher education more challenging in addressing this issue.

### DEFINING AGNOSTICS

Etymologically, agnostic came from Greek words: *a* and *gnos*—not knowing or no knowledge. An agnostic simply means a person who does not know. But in Indonesia, there exists a significant gap between how the general public and netizens understand agnosticism compared to the etymological definition. Many

Indonesians mistakenly interpret agnosticism as the belief in God's existence but without adherence to any organized religion (Thobib Al-Asyhar, 2019). Recently, Jerinx, an Indonesian musician, echoes the same idea on his Instagram when explaining agnosticism as "an spiritual ideology which does not fully believe in religions but fully believe in the existence of higher power, superior to human being" (Jerinx, 2024). This misconception may stem from widespread disillusionment with institutionalized religion, which is often perceived as authoritative, commercialized, and, in some cases, corrupt. Meanwhile, the failure of communism in Uni Soviet pulled atheism down as well. Having been disappointed with these two—theism and atheism—agnosticism can be 'the most rational and sexy choice' (Thobib Al-Asyhar, 2019).

For many other Indonesians, there is a lexical definition. *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) defines an agnostic as "orang yang berpandangan bahwa kebenaran tertinggi (misalnya Tuhan) tidak dapat diketahui dan mungkin tidak akan dapat diketahui" which translates to "a person who thinks that the ultimate truth (like God) cannot be known and might never be known" (KBBI, n.d.). *Merriam-Webster* offers a similar definition: "a person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (such as God) is unknown and probably unknowable." *Oxford Dictionary* defines agnosticism as "the belief that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God." These definitions are in agreement that an agnostic does not affirm the existence of God—contrary to widespread misconception. Rather, agnosticism is an epistemological claim that the existence of God or ultimate truths is unknowable.

So, while a theist answers 'Yes' to the question "Does God exist?" and an atheist answers 'No' an agnostic will answer "I don't know." This distinction highlights that agnosticism is not a middle ground between belief and non-belief in God—another popular misconception that agnosticism is virtuous for staying in the middle or neutral. Even atheist Richard Dawkins, unintentionally, imply such idea by placing agnostics right in the middle of spectrum (Dawkins, 2006). Many people today think that both theists and atheists are arrogant for claiming to know the answer to God question. Agnostics are often viewed as humble for having the courage to say "I don't know." This perceived humility makes agnosticism attractive, as it represents an open-mindedness that is missing from both ends of the belief spectrum. But, of course, as Oppy (2018) correctly pointed out, "rather than being a compromise between atheism and theism, agnosticism is a rejection of both."

## MAPPING AGNOSTICS

Robin Le Poidevin's work (2010) has been very meticulous in classifying agnosticism. Agnosticism can be mapped into two main categories: weak agnosticism (WA) and strong agnosticism (SA). A weak agnostic typically holds the view that they personally do not know whether God exists. This uncertainty is personal; they may doubt or inquire, but they accept that others might claim to know the answer. For weak agnostics, there is nothing intrinsically—logically or factually—wrong with someone else having confidence in their belief about God's existence. They see their own position as one of temporary uncertainty, often arising from not having fully thought through the issue.

In contrast, a strong agnostic goes further, asserting that **no one** can know whether God exists. This claim is universal, not merely personal. Strong agnosticism insists that it is fundamentally impossible for anyone to have knowledge of God's existence or non-existence. While strong agnosticism implies weak agnosticism—since if no one can know, it follows that the strong agnostic does not know—weak agnosticism does not necessarily lead to strong agnosticism. A weak agnostic may simply lack knowledge due to personal reasons or lack of reflection, while a strong agnostic bases their stance on firm principles.

One common principle behind strong agnosticism is the belief that humans, by nature, are limited. It is beyond human rationality or comprehension to definitively answer the question of whether God exists. In this view, the limitations of human cognition make it impossible to grasp such a metaphysical concept. Another principle is that God, by nature, is unknowable. Even if humans were unlimited in their reasoning capacities, God's existence would still lie beyond the scope of human understanding. For strong agnostics, this unknowability is intrinsic, meaning no amount of inquiry or reasoning could resolve the question.

Another distinction made by Poidevin (2010) is between **global agnosticism (GA)** and **local agnosticism (LA)**. Global agnostics take a radical approach, asserting that we cannot know anything with certainty. Their position resembles that of 1st-century Pyrrhonian skeptics, who doubted everything to the extent that they even questioned their own reasoning (Frances, 2019). For global agnostics, the idea of possessing any kind of knowledge is an illusion. However, this stance is inherently self-contradictory—if one claims to know that nothing can be known, they fall into a logical paradox. Global agnosticism, then, is not discussed here.

**Local agnosticism**, on the other hand, is specific. Local agnostics claim that we cannot know certain things, particularly those related to the divine or supernatural. A local agnostic may believe in the existence of God, yet still maintain that certain aspects of God's nature are beyond human understanding. This position allows for the possibility of belief while acknowledging limitations in human knowledge. Even the great theologian and philosopher such as Thomas Aquinas affirmed *apophaticism*—that there are divine mysteries which cannot be fully comprehended (O'Grady, 2020). Thus, a local agnostic might assert that while some truths can be known, some questions about God or the divine remain ultimately unknowable to us human.

Richard Dawkins (2006) introduces two categories of agnosticism: **Temporary Agnostic in Practice (TAP)** and **Permanent Agnostic in Principle (PAP)**. A TAP views theism and atheism as equal hypotheses, holding that neither position is superior to the other. For the TAP, both theism and atheism are supported by evidence that is either equally weak or equally strong, making it difficult to favor one position over the other. In this view, the agnostic is simply waiting for future evidence that could tip the balance in favor of one hypothesis. For them, the question of God's existence remains unresolved but potentially answerable as new evidence emerges.

In contrast, a PAP holds that no amount of future evidence will ever provide a definitive answer to the question of God's existence. This is because the PAP believes that evidence is either fundamentally inapplicable to this metaphysical question or that the kinds of evidence typically offered in this debate are inadequate. Even if they were open to considering evidence, the PAP might request different types of evidence than what is commonly provided, such as empirical or logical proofs that go beyond what is usually presented in discussions about the divine. For the PAP, the question of God's existence is permanently unknowable, no matter what future developments or arguments arise.

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Having classified types of agnosticism, it becomes crucial for educators, especially in Christian higher education, to correctly identify different challenges posed by each type. Christian teachers must be equipped to prepare for the inevitable battle of worldviews. This kind of battle is often subtle, slow, but often persuasive and life-transforming. To do so effectively, educators can employ two types of responses: **philosophical** and **psychological**. These approaches will help teachers address both the intellectual and emotional aspects of agnostic belief, fostering thoughtful dialogue and spiritual growth.

### Philosophical Perspective

From a Christian philosophical perspective, particularly based on biblical texts such as Romans 1:18-25, there appears to be little room for agnosticism of any kind. In these verses, the Apostle Paul asserts that God's existence is evident and undeniable, even if He is not physically perceivable to human senses. The passage acknowledges that God's essence is not visible, but it argues that humanity is still capable of discerning His existence by observing the created world. Paul emphasizes that humans can infer a cause (God) from the effects—namely, the order and morality present in the universe. Therefore, according to these biblical teachings, the existence of God should be obvious, and agnosticism is seen as a suppression of this truth rather than a genuine position of uncertainty.

The passage goes on to explain that those who suppress this innate knowledge of God do so wilfully, and as a result, they fall into idolatry—worshiping false gods or adopting empty religious practices. This theological framework suggests that human beings, deep down, are aware of God's existence but may choose to deny or suppress it. As a consequence, they replace the true worship of God with man-made religions or secular substitutes. Thus, in the Christian theological view, agnosticism is not considered a neutral or innocent stance but a deliberate rejection of what is naturally knowable about God (Moreland & Craig, 2017).

A central tenet of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the **Incarnation**, where God took on human form in Jesus Christ. From an epistemological standpoint, this can be seen as God providing direct evidence to satisfy human epistemic justification. Unlike abstract arguments for God's existence, which may be inaccessible or unconvincing to those without philosophical training, the Incarnation offers tangible, sensory evidence. In becoming flesh, God made Himself knowable through physical presence and direct interaction with humanity. Jesus' miracles, such as healing the blind (e.g., John 9), serve as concrete examples of God actively seeking those who are spiritually or physically impaired, guiding them to a justified belief in Him.



The resurrection stands as the greatest proof of all, where Jesus not only rose from the dead but intentionally appeared to many, providing undeniable evidence of God's power and existence (e.g., Luke 24:36-43). By presenting Himself to His disciples and others after His resurrection, Jesus ensured that as many people as possible would have sufficient justification to believe in God's existence.

From a Christian perspective, this combination of **general revelation** (the natural world and moral order) and **special revelation** (the Incarnation and Jesus' works) satisfies both the **Temporary Agnostic in Practice (TAP)** and the **Permanent Agnostic in Principle (PAP)**. For the TAP, God's existence is made clear through direct evidence that balances the scale of uncertainty, while for the PAP, even though epistemic evidence may normally be insufficient, the Incarnation and the tangible presence of Jesus serve as exceptional forms of proof that break through human limitations. Thus, Christianity offers a robust response to agnosticism by providing both rational inferences from the natural world and direct, sensory experience of the divine.

### Psychological Perspective

There is always a reason for every human behavior including why someone decide to believe or to doubt their belief in the existence of God. In order to help agnostic students, teachers need to understand the reason behind students' ignorance of God's existence. According to one study conducted by Bradley et al. (2018), there are nine categories of reasons for non-belief in the existence of God: intellectual, relational, early socialization, current socialization, bad experiences with religion or antireligion, intuitive, agnostic, and existential. Based on their findings, intellectual reasons were found as the strongest reason to not believe in God, followed by intuitive, agnostic, and societal concerns which were significantly higher than negative personal experiences with religion (Bradley et al., 2018). However, this study also raises other possibilities for understanding the reason for agnostics to have doubt in the existence of God. Either it is the problem of suffering which affects their desirability and perceived worthiness of God as relational partner or their examination of loving God had become incompatible with the level of suffering of the world (Sterba, 2022). Therefore, if such God exists yet it is not a loving God, non-believers including agnostics would prefer for such God to not exist.

Many studies also found that intellectual or cognitive styles and analytical thinking was one of the factors that contributes to someone disbelief in God or negatively correlated with religious belief (Pennycook et al., 2016). Analytical thinking may override their intuition to believe. Intellectual people are also more likely to be nonconformist which makes them more comfortable deviating from religious majority or more open minded (Mercier, Kramer, and Azim, 2018). This is also supported by another study that found agnostics to have higher level of openness and weaker self-identifiers rather than atheists (Karim & Saroglou, 2024). Thus, Christians teachers also need to foster their analytical thinking and integrate their reason along with faith since both should complement each other; instead of contradictory. Christian educators also need to give proper explanation about the concept of loving God to agnostics while also validating their personal experience or findings that reality is often far from God's ideals yet it does not mean that a loving God does not exist.

Self-identity is also one aspect that Christian educators should be aware when making dialogue with agnostics. Agnostics have weaker self-identifiers than atheist means they did not really emphasize the importance of grouping categories. Thus, putting an agnostic into an 'agnostic box' and imposing them to acknowledge themselves as an agnostic may make them feel discriminated or being judged. Instead of making them admit their position or label as an agnostic, it is more important to address their curiosity, questions, or doubt about what is still unacceptable for them to believe in the existence of God. At the same time, doing so can help a PAP type to become a TAP type.

Psychology of religion has been discussed since early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gordon Allport is one psychologist who had theorized the integration between mature personality and person's view on religion. According to Allport (1950), every man has a desire to be fulfilled which influence his responses toward religion. Either this desire is physical and self-centered (*viscerogenic*) or something that are more complex like values and ideals (*psychogenic*). Agnosticism which is derived from 'a-gnosis' or 'not knowing' then has their desire into the pursuit of ideal truth about the existence of God. Christian teachers, then, need to acknowledge that there are some positive attitudes that can be learned from agnostics.

Agnosticism openness to possibility of God's existence and to question a belief (such to not fall on blind faith and dogmatism) are attitudes that need to be appreciated and acknowledged. Allport addressed that one characteristic of mature religious sentiment was differentiation. It is a state where a person is being

observant and critical yet also has complex view and more realistic, reflective attitude towards his or her religion (Allport, 1950). Therefore, differentiated persons know the reason behind their belief while also being genuine with themselves. This kind of trait is also what agnostics have, since they do not easily fall into belief (or to not belief) something by following majority consensus or by others' personal experiences or claims. This trait should encourage Christian educators to also differentiate their faith, to study, analyze, and understand their own reason to believe in Christian faith. When Christian educators fail to give a rational explanation or to answer 'because the Bible said so' may turn Christians into stumbling block in the eye of an agnostic.

Allport also noted one aspect of those with mature personality and religious sentiment which is called heuristic character. Allport defined heuristic characteristic as an act to hold a belief tentatively until it can be confirmed or until it helps us discover a more valid belief. It is characteristic of the mature mind that it can act whole-heartedly even without absolute certainty where a person can be sure without being cocksure (Allport, 1950, p. 72). Allport heuristic characteristic definition is aligned with agnosticism stance to not fall into an extreme theist and atheist and their claim of knowing God. However, Allport also emphasized that optimistic bias toward life is a necessary condition for life. Optimistic bias and faith are largely responsible for human accomplishment and it would be silly to lapse into unproductive skepticism, so long as someone has a chance of being correct (p. 73) This argument can also help to address agnostics to not only be cautious for falling into dogmatism but also to be cautious for extreme skepticism. Allport's view is also supported by recent research that found agnostics who had assumed God exists and loves them experienced more positive well-being rather than those who do not (Byerly, 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

Agnosticism presents a unique challenge to Christian education, particularly in a context like Indonesia, where religious belief is deeply embedded in both the legal and cultural frameworks. The rise of agnosticism, especially among younger generations, calls for a nuanced and thoughtful approach from Christian educators. By understanding the different forms of agnosticism—whether weak, strong, local, or global—teachers can more effectively engage with students who express uncertainty about God's existence. Moreover, the Christian theological response, rooted in both general and special revelation, provides compelling grounds for addressing agnostic doubts. Through philosophical reasoning and compassionate dialogue, Christian educators are not only equipped to challenge the intellectual foundations of agnosticism but also to address the emotional and psychological factors that often accompany it. In doing so, they can offer a path that balances faith, reason, and empathy, helping students navigate their spiritual journeys in an informed and loving manner.

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