

## Agnosticism



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### I. Agnosticism as a Philosophical Position

1. *Definition*. The term "agnosticism," as well as other modern words (Fr. *agnosticisme*, It. *agnosticismo*, Germ. *agnostizismus*), has its etymological roots in the Greek word *ágnostos*, that is, "unknowable." Although agnosticism as a philosophical school of thought has a long history and has been described from time to time with diverse connotations, it was the English naturalist Thomas H. Huxley (1825-1895) who coined the term "agnosticism" as an antithesis to the "gnostic" of Church history. Huxley saw the "gnostic" as someone who claims to know much about things which another does not. (cf. *Collected Essays*, V, London, 1898, pp. 237-245). Huxley coined the term in the context of a congress of the *Metaphysical Society* of London in 1869 and later re-iterated the same in his work *Agnosticism* in 1889. It is important to point out the antithesis posed by Huxley between a religious "gnosis," which would claim to know the unknowable, and the "agnosticism" of the scientist, which refuses to determine *a priori* the solution to the problems that form the object of his or her research. In fact, it is within this refusal that the "meaning" of modern agnosticism resides inasmuch as it does not wish to be, in the majority of cases, a hostile refutation of metaphysical or religious topics —as in the case of atheism— but rather a suspension of judgment in regard to the question of God and of the Absolute. The question of God and of the Absolute is neither denied nor affirmed by agnosticism in order to allow scientific research to be uninhibited. Whereas [atheism](#) [2] holds that God does not exist, agnosticism limits itself to

affirming that we do not possess —above all from a scientific and cognitive point of view— adequate rational instruments to affirm or negate the reality of God or of the Absolute. In a letter of 1879, C. Darwin declared himself an agnostic in the same sense as coined by Huxley. Similarly, H. Spencer, maintaining in his work *First Principles* (1862) the impossibility of scientifically demonstrating the mysterious force that sustains natural phenomena, was classified as an agnostic. The physiologist Raymond Du-Boys in his work *The Seven Enigmas of the World* (1880) held that in front of the great enigmas of the world and of existence, it is most responsible for man, and above all for the scientist, to pronounce an *ignorabimus* (we will not know), since those enigmas go beyond the realm of scientific knowledge. One may conjecture that modern agnosticism, which is not to be confused with the agnostic tendencies that have been around even from the origins of the history of philosophy, predominantly has a scientific background and is motivated in particular by the imposition Kantian criticism gave to the metaphysical question.

2. *The Critique of the Principle of Causality.* In fact, the most rigorous modern formulation of metaphysical agnosticism was formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's metaphysical agnosticism has decisively influenced both philosophical and scientific agnosticism as well as the religious agnosticism of the 19th and 20th centuries. In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), especially in the third part (*Transcendental Dialectics*), and in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant clearly shows how the presuppositions of metaphysical agnosticism derive, on the one hand, from the empiricism of David Hume (1711-1776), particularly from his critique of the metaphysical concept of "causality," and on the other hand from the idea of *ratio separata* proper to modern rationalism. The empiricism of Hume did indeed affirm as absolute the "principle of experience," already formulated by John Locke (1632-1704) in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1688) and later elaborated by George Berkeley (1685-1753) in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) with the famous statement "*esse est percipi*" (to be is to be perceived). Basing himself upon the principle of experience, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740) and later in his *Exposition Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume denies that abstract ideas have truth-value corresponding to experience, including even the idea of matter. It follows then that both the idea of cause and the consequent metaphysical principle of causality, according to which ontological causes are the foundation of physical causes, must be rejected as deceptive because they are contrary to the principle of experience. The distinction between ideas and impressions leads Hume to sustain that only those ideas which make reference to immediate impressions have truth-value. Now since the idea of cause makes reference only to an impression of sequences of events, it signifies only the order of this succession, and not the inference of a causal principle other than experience. The idea of cause then, Hume concludes, is only something that one feels, or rather a belief, which arises in one's consciousness because one observes the repetition in the experience of sequences that tend to repeat. These repetitions mistakenly lead one to believe in the possibility of locating in one of the elements of the sequence the cause, and in the other the effect (cf. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part III, 14-15; cf. also part II, 6 and part IV, 2).

The demolition of the idea of cause based upon the radicalization of the principle of experience formulated by Hume inevitably led to the elimination of the very foundation of metaphysics. Starting from the second period of Plato's works (cf. *Phaedo*, 79a, 98c-e, 99e, 100c-d) and later with the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle (cf. *Books I and II*), metaphysics had made precisely the principle of causality the cornerstone of ontology, setting out from there to a knowledge that would no longer limit itself to observing effects, but rather would be capable of rising to the fundamental causes of being.

## **II. Immanuel Kant's Agnosticism: Consequences for Scientific Thought and Religion.**

*1. Kant and Metaphysical Agnosticism.* From Hume's critique of the idea of cause, Immanuel Kant knew in effect how to draw out all the essential gnoseological consequences in order to formulate his critical evaluation of metaphysical knowledge. Already Sextus Empiricus (180-220), in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, had criticized the principle of causality, just as would some of the representatives of nominalism do much later in the Middle Ages, in particular, Nicholas D'Autrecourt (1300-1350), Pierre D'Ailly (1350-1420), and William Ockham (1280-1349). Yet, as already observed, in the Kantian metaphysical agnosticism such critique joins itself to that acceptance of the primacy of experience proper to empiricism, as well as to the recognition of the value of the autonomous activity of the intellect proper to modern rationalism.

For the philosopher of Königsberg, all knowledge that would have truth-value must be modeled upon the type of knowledge that makes science possible. In other words, only knowledge that results from the synthesis between "matter," constituted by phenomena as the proper object of empirical observation, and the action of "forms *a priori*," through which those phenomena are grasped by a specific category of our intellect, would have truth-value. So, for Kant, one is dealing with the examination of the nature of "synthetic *a priori* judgments," in which he reforms the foundation not only of scientific knowledge, but also of all knowledge valuable for humanity. All knowledge that one desires to have the character of "science" must therefore be the result of a synthesis between matter, offered from the vastness of phenomenal experience, and an *a priori* form, given by the intellect. In as much as the "I think" is fount and root of every *a priori* category of the intellect, it therefore constitutes the transcendental condition of all knowledge, and such knowledge must be understood as the transcendental constitution of experience. As a result, philosophical knowledge is modeled after scientific knowledge, which in turn will become the paradigm of all sensible knowledge. Post-Kantian philosophy will often recognize solely itself as the methodology of science or [epistemology](#) [3], i.e., as a reflection on the scientific status of the theories of science. Thus, philosophy progressively loses its nature as "knowledge" in order to become a reflection on the "modalities of knowledge." It is clear then that metaphysics, which claims to go "beyond" the appearance of experience (*phenomenon*) to grasp the essence of things in themselves (*noumenon*), which are not subject to experience, becomes, in a Kantian scheme, a knowledge that has no object, and therefore cannot claim to be a well-founded knowledge. According to the image of the same Kant, metaphysics appears outside the realm of experience as a dove that seeks to fly without air beneath its wings. For this reason, when metaphysics asks questions about the existence of God, of the soul, of the world, of freedom—all realities that escape from a phenomenal type of experience—it falls into insurmountable antinomies (cf. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, I, 2, ch. 2: "The Antinomy of Pure Reason"). Metaphysical agnosticism, therefore, consists not in the *a priori* denial of such realities, but in the thesis that one cannot attain any metaphysical knowledge, because it lies outside the domain of phenomenal experience.

*2. Kant and Scientific Agnosticism.* Numerous philosophies were inspired by the Kantian model of knowledge in the 19th and 20th centuries, and have dealt with all the implicit consequences of metaphysical agnosticism expressed in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. One can say that "scientific agnosticism" constitutes the flip side of metaphysical agnosticism, in as much as it presupposes it and radicalizes it by affirming the primacy of an "agnostic" scientific knowledge, being indifferent in principle to the great themes of metaphysics, particularly those of religion. Thus is the [positivism](#) [4] of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), which considers as the only truth "facts," i.e., that which can be described according to concrete experience and, similarly to Kant, judges all research of the metaphysical causes of the facts themselves to be without foundation (cf. *Discourse on the Positive Spirit*, 1844; *Course of Positive Philosophy*, 1830-42). And by applying the principles of Comte's positivism in the study of primitive peoples, it will be the French sociological school (E. Durkheim, M. Mauss, L. Lévy-Bruhl), that will bring about a strong critique of religion by affirming that the religious dimension manifested by a specific people is nothing other than the fruit of an imposition exerted by the dominant part of the group

(cf. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912).

A particular type of scientific agnosticism was represented by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). In his work *The Factors of Organic Evolution* (1887), Spencer maintains that all of nature and the entire cosmos are regulated by an evolutionistic principle which is not finalistic (see [finalism](#)) [5], in the sense that, departing from the study of natural phenomena, it would not be possible to infer the existence of God as creator and orderer of the cosmos. Nonetheless, for this reason alone such existence cannot be denied, in as much as the same Spencer holds that at the confines of human experience and of scientific knowledge, there exists the “Unknowable,” which is precisely that which is “beyond” the confines of experience and science (cf. *System of Synthetic Philosophy*, London 1858). The Unknowable is for Spencer that which metaphysics and religion have called [God](#) [6] and which, even though it is not a part of the cognitive categories of science, nonetheless cannot be denied by them, as scientific atheism on the other hand would claim to do.

Contemporary epistemology, developing after the crisis of scientific positivism, which had attributed to scientific knowledge a paradigmatic value, subjected this latter to a dense critique on the part of authors such as Poincaré, Boutroux, Duhem, Mach, Bergson, Hilbert, Peano, and Frege. Numerous scientific discoveries as well as the progress made in mathematics and logic and in the new relative paradigms of interpretation formulated in the 20th century drove scientists and philosophers of science towards a conception of the laws of nature formulated from scientific theories, one no longer static and mechanistic, but dynamic and probabilistic, marked by unpredictability because it had been opened to the emergence of complexity. Such rethinking gave birth to diverse epistemological currents: neo-positivistic logic (Schlick, Carnap, Ayer, Russell), according to which only “experimental propositions” or factual propositions have scientific value, or those whose content is empirically verifiable; the metaphysics of science (Meyerson, Eddington), according to which all science implies a metaphysics, and the same scientific knowledge must be understood as a progressive discovery of reality, able again to find its ultimate foundation in a metaphysics; scientific rationalism (Popper, Feyerabend), according to which science is nothing other than a rational construction of man and the observed facts nothing other than elements dependent upon the scientific theories utilized to organize them, whereas the theories themselves are, in their turn, responses to preceding theoretical problems and, in an ultimate analysis, systems of rash conjectures to which the experiment adds nothing true. If the scientific theory is the elaboration of a theory capable of resolving unresolved problems, the experimental verification plays then the role of a continuous control of the theory itself, with the warning of Karl Popper (1902-1994), that one ought not to speak of a “verification” in a positivistic sense, but rather of a “falsification,” because every scientific theory is not definitive, but provisional, subject to being falsified on the part of a better theory.

Although contemporary epistemology has strongly contested the Kantian and positivistic conception of knowledge, it did not know how to remove from scientific agnosticism its implications. In effect, the Kantian anti-metaphysical prejudice has remained present in almost all forms of contemporary epistemology, in the sense that although science itself evolves and the same evaluation of objective value of scientific theories transforms itself, science nonetheless continues to be considered the sole area of knowledge valuable for humanity. The questions that go beyond the domain of science —the problem of God in particular— can at most be accepted as questions that, as in Kant, have sense for the existence of man, but not for his knowledge. Scientific agnosticism consists precisely in dismissing the idea that science, however one understands it, represents an area where metaphysical and religious questions can be formulated or at least recognized as significant, i.e., have the sense of a question and the value of knowledge.



3. *Kant and Religious Agnosticism*. It is true that, through an in-depth analysis of the dynamism of the moral conscience in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant recuperates not only the truth of freedom and the immortality of the soul, but the truth of the existence of God as the ultimate and necessary meaning of human moral life and therefore of the same religious dimension as the meaning of existence. “It is therefore possible,” wrote John Paul II in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), “to speak from a solid foundation about *human experience, moral experience, or religious experience*. And if it is possible to speak of such experiences, it is difficult to deny that, in the realm of human experience, one also finds good and evil, truth and beauty, and God. God Himself certainly is not an object of human empiricism; the Sacred Scripture, in its own way, emphasizes this: ‘No one has ever seen God’ (cf. *Jn* 1:18). If God is a knowable object—as both the Book of Wisdom and the Letter to the Romans teach—He is such on the basis of man’s experience both of the visible world and of his interior world. This is the point of departure for Immanuel Kant’s study of ethical experience in which he abandons the old approach found in the writings of the Bible and of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Man recognizes himself as an *ethical being*, capable of acting according to criteria of good and evil, and not only those of profit and pleasure.” (p. 34).

The way of moral experience in order to arrive at God is certainly different from the way of cosmological and ontological experience but not in and of itself opposed to the latter. If indeed it is without question that, from the strictly metaphysical point of view, Kantian criticism is a form of theoretical agnosticism, such agnosticism proves to be contradictory for a simple reason. Once not only the “thinkability,” but also the necessity to postulate the existence of God and the immortality of the [soul](#) [7] are admitted as necessary and inescapable conditions for the moral life of human beings, it is also legitimate and rational to think that the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are not only thinkable and able to be postulated, but also demonstrable—a demonstration not of a mathematical or scientific type, bound to the world of sense experience, but a demonstration as an authentic and veritable course of thought capable of drawing from that modality of being which transcends the facts of pure sense experience. When Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) writes in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, “We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all” (6.52), he expresses the awareness of the value of scientific knowledge as knowledge of “the facts” of the world, but also, like Kant, that before the problems of life—which are not scientific, but moral and religious—the demonstrations of science are not the whole and it is necessary to draw from a different type of knowledge because “the facts all belong only to the task and not to its performance.” (*ibidem* 6.4321).

The distinction posed by Kant between the three fundamental questions of philosophy belonging respectively to three dimensions of the human person, “What can I know” (metaphysics); “How ought I to act” (ethics); “What can I hope for” (religion) was thus at the beginning of a new anthropology, which held that the diverse questions formulated by Kant correspond to diverse and distinct dimensions of the human person. If then the metaphysical question is resolved by the questions of science as in Kant—finishing thus in the position of a metaphysical agnosticism—the moral and religious questions were then separated from the metaphysical question, giving rise to philosophical responses different from those of metaphysics and science. One no longer tried to demonstrate the existence of God starting from the cosmos and being, but from the signs of transcendence present in the very existence of human beings (ethical and religious). One no longer arrives at God from the cosmos or from being, but one arrives at God from man. Both the “methodology of the unverifiable” of G. Marcel (1889-1973) and of other existentialist authors, and the “method of immanence” of M. Blondel (1861-1949) as also the notion of “measure” in K. Jaspers (1883-1969), are moving in the horizon of a search for religious “meaning” beyond the limits in which Kantian criticism had enclosed knowledge. Several authors speak in this regard of “religious agnosticism,” which consists in holding that both the moral question and the religious question are not resolvable on the level of scientific and metaphysical knowledge, but that the response and solution ought rather to be found in other dimensions of knowledge, which are not able to be

formulated in the traditional modalities of metaphysics nor in those of science (here understood in its wider dimension of rigorous knowledge). The encounter between theoretical agnosticism and religious thought was expressed in an acute way, to the point of elaborating a “philosophical theology,” by Wilhelm Weischedel (1905-1975), who, in his work, *The Problem of God in Skeptical Thought* (*Die Frage nach God im skeptischen Denken*, 1976), discussed in an exhaustive way the issue of religious agnosticism (cf. also Gollwitzer and Weischedel, 1965).

Finally, agnosticism was shaped by several existentialist authors, who nevertheless offered it a strong religious inspiration. For Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), to rationally prove God meant nothing other than to lose God, because God is above reason. The “absurd” of the faith, that which was revealed in Abraham, who was commanded to sacrifice his son, contradicting every law of a morality founded on metaphysics, meant for Kierkegaard that humans and God find themselves on two totally separate planes, and that the passage from one to the other is not conceivable without the leap of faith. For Kierkegaard, the leap of faith represents the great point of demarcation between a philosophy that at the end of its own development recognizes the truths of the faith (*obsequium rationale fidei*) and a philosophy that holds that only after having followed through with the human possibilities of metaphysical and scientific reason is the leap of faith possible, which is “the incessant battle of the faith for the possible.” (L. Chestov, *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*, Paris 1953, p. 167). The battle between a rational explanation of existential events and the understanding of these same events in the light of faith in divine revelation here becomes dramatic and leads to conclusions paradoxical for reason. For Leon Chestov, “speculative philosophy remains on the surface, moves in a plane of two dimensions: existential thought knows a third dimension inexistent for speculation: faith.” (*ibidem*). And Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) likewise sustains in *The Tragic Feeling of Life* (1913) that there is no possible conciliation between philosophical reason and life, between philosophy and religion of existence, and that exactly this contrast constitutes the “tragic feeling of life.”

Religious agnosticism therefore operates in a profound theoretical contradiction. On the one hand, it affirms the existence of God and the truths of religion by faith, but on the other hand it denies reason the possibility of drawing upon these truths, which all the same constitute the ultimate meaning and definitive sense of existence. When F. Dostoevskij (1821-1881) writes that if he had to choose between the truth and Christ, he would chose Christ even against the truth, he expresses the most advanced point of a religious agnosticism that refutes *a priori* the possibility of conciliating religious truth with the truth of intellectual knowledge.

*4. The Criticism of Agnosticism.* Beyond what was previously emphasized, one could add that agnosticism falls into the same errors on account of which already philosophies of antiquity could not avoid falling into the skeptical position. If indeed nothing can be said about [God](#) [8], his existence, and the immortality of the soul, then the affirmation that nothing can be said and known itself constitutes a truth, which contradicts the content of the same affirmation. Likewise, the thesis according to which human knowledge has as its sole object the phenomena of science proved to be, with Kant and then with Wittgenstein, inadequate to understand the complexity of the problems of the human person, which are not of a scientific character alone, but embrace the questions of a moral religious life. Exactly for this reason, the recognition of the limits of human knowledge contains implicitly within itself the recognition of a truth beyond those limits and without limits, that is, the recognition of God. Thus the critique of agnosticism consists in casting light upon the difficulty and, in a certain way, the absurdity of the position of one who affirms that the meaning of existence cannot be known and that yet this meaning nonetheless exists and needs to be affirmed on a moral and religious level.

One may observe that agnosticism is present today in a good part of contemporary culture, and not only

in the scientific and philosophical realms, but also in the literary and artistic. Although it would not identify itself with [atheism](#) [2], agnosticism flows into one of the more refined expressions of nihilism once it's gone full circle. For just as nihilism does, agnosticism concludes with the impossibility of "knowing" the meaning of existence, which becomes enclosed—at least on a theoretical plane—in "non-meaning" and in the "nothing" of a radical finitude. In this way, agnosticism also clashes with the radical problem of the meaning of freedom. Deprived of its connection with an Absolute that it renounces to know, freedom loses its meaning. Also the responsibility towards the others loses meaning as well, a responsibility necessarily associated to any exercise of freedom. The impossibility of sustaining an existence with a meaningful commitment ends in the merging of agnosticism with positions of humanistic atheism, also unsustainable, which are the sole—though nonetheless contradictory—way out for a reason that wishes to continue to be faithful to its tension towards justice and truth, without however wishing to recognize the theoretical and rational counterpart that such a tension possesses. More generally, the problem of agnosticism also sheds light on how the relationship between faith and reason needs to be dealt with not only on a plane of analytical rationality, but also and maybe above all on an anthropological plan, overcoming the idea of a *ratio separata*, which, having arisen with modernity, found precisely in agnosticism one of its most explicit results.

### III. The Teachings of the Catholic Magisterium on Agnosticism

*1. The First Vatican Council and the Problem of Fideism.* Of all the teachings of the [Magisterium of the Catholic Church](#) [9] that deal most directly with the position of philosophical agnosticism, there are first of all those that address the capacity of human reason to arrive at the truth of things without stopping merely at their appearance, notably the philosophical doctrine regarding the natural knowledge of God. In the dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* of the First Vatican Council (1870), it is solemnly affirmed that the Church "holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things; 'for the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made' (*Rom 1:20*).'" (DH 3004).

Moreover, *Dei Filius* specifies that which it is possible to know of God by means of reason, namely, his existence and the main attributes of his nature; it also confirms that such knowledge constitutes a necessary presupposition of faith in Revelation. To this doctrine, the Council joins the corresponding condemnation of every affirmation "that the one true God, our Creator and our Lord, cannot be known with certitude by those things which have been made, by the natural light of human reason." (DH 3026). Human reason is therefore held to be able, even with its own force alone, to know the existence of God as the beginning and end of all things and to elevate itself by means of the observation of His works to the knowledge of His attributes of omnipotence, perfection, and goodness. Such truth, which belongs in and of itself to the field of philosophy, is affirmed here as a definition of faith, which implies the censure of every form of agnosticism, especially in its multiple modern expressions.

According to some authors, among whom is Cornelio Fabro (1911-1995), it is therefore necessary to describe as "theological agnosticism" all theological positions that, by radicalizing the transcendence of God and the weakness of human reason, declare it is possible to know of God only the truths that come from Revelation, namely from Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Examples of these positions are found in the patristic and scholastic epoch in some of the exponents, of a negative theology of a Pseudo-Areopagite derivation, but also in the Muslim theologians who are rigorous followers of *Kalām* (tradition), and even in Moses Maimonides himself, the master of medieval Judaic theology, according to whom God cannot be named by means of positive names that refer to created things, because His nature totally transcends creation. In particular, other expressions of theological agnosticism would be all those

theologies of the 17th through 19th centuries that, in reaction to rationalism and to Enlightenment, diminish the capabilities of human reason to the point of rendering it incapable of knowing natural truths, and trust themselves either to faith alone (fideism) or to tradition (traditionalism), or would claim that, in order to arrive at any truth, human reason must draw directly from the divine essence (ontologism).

It is worthwhile to consider that fideistic tendencies have always been present in the history of Christian culture, and have also been defended by noble spirits who intended more than anything else to safeguard the faith from certain philosophical errors of a rationalistic and nihilistic type. Positions near to fideism in diverse ways can be found in Tatian and Tertullian in the patristic epoch; Peter Damian and William Ockham in the Middle Ages; Pascal, Kierkegaard, Chestov, Dostoevskij and de Unamuno in the Modern Age, but above all in Martin Luther (1483-1546). Furthermore, fideism found a complete formulation in the 19th century with L.-E. Bautain (1796-1867) and F.-R. de Lamennais (1783-1854), who were seriously concerned about the obstacles raised against the faith by modern thought. Although recognizing the right intentions of those who hold such currents of thought, the Catholic Magisterium nonetheless considers fideism in its theoretical and theological formulation as a form of agnosticism. Similarly, the Magisterium considers as an expression of agnosticism “traditionalism,” which had qualified proponents in the 19th century in J. De Maistre (1723-1851) e L.-G.-A. De Bonald (1754-1840) and which maintains the primacy of the tradition of the Church, reductively understood, against the authority of philosophical reason. Both fideism and traditionalism, in the name of the primacy of faith and tradition, and as a justified reaction against the *ratio separata* of modernity, reached the point of denying human reason even its legitimate capacities, thereby falling into articulated forms of agnosticism.

The Magisterium of the Catholic Church also considers as a form of agnosticism the “ontologism” already held by Nicholas de Malebranche (1638-1715), even if the term was coined by Vincent Gioberti (1801-1852) in his *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy*. Ontologism was also attributed to the philosophy of Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), thus resulting in a condemnation which only recently was officially recognized as “overcome” once it was historically certified that the theses judged erroneous (cf. DH 3201-3241) were not representative of the thought of the author (cf. OR, June 30, 2001, p. 5). Ontologism, in order to react to rationalism but in a way diametrically opposed to fideism, held that human reason has a certain vision of the truth directly in the divine essence in the sense that God is not only the *primum* in the order of being, but also the *primum* in the order of knowledge. For ontologism, as for fideism, human reason does not possess any really autonomous faculty, although it can elevate itself to the knowledge of every truth seeing it directly in the truth and in the divine “essence.” (cf. DH 2841-2847).

2. *The Question about the Agnostic Character of Modernism.* The Magisterium of the Church has since also considered modernism to be a form of agnosticism. Modernism, which as a philosophical-religious movement developed in the womb of Catholicism between the 19th and 20th centuries, is characterized by an often uncritical acceptance of the principles of modern philosophy. Its most important representatives were Le Roy and Loisy in France, Tyrrell in England, Fogazzaro and Bonaiuti in Italy. Modernism was condemned by Pius X (1903-1914) in numerous documents, above all in the decree *Lamentabili* of 1907 and then, in the same year, in the encyclical letter *Pascendi dominici gregis*, and finally in 1910 by the motu proprio *Sanctorum antistitum*. Pius X referred to modernism as the “synthesis of all heresies” by which he intended to signify that all the errors manifested in the thought of the Modern Era seemed to be flowing together in this current: agnosticism, relativism, subjectivism, rationalism, scientism, immanentism, historicism. Faith was then reduced to a form of vague sentiment, and the content of dogma put under the changeable laws of history.

In a certain way, modernism is a consequence of Kantian agnosticism on the theological plane in that “the



modernists place the foundation of their religious philosophy in that doctrine which is commonly called “agnosticism.” Perforce, then, human reason is entirely restricted to *phenomena*, namely things that appear, and that appearance by which they appear; it has neither the right nor the power to transgress the limits of the same. Therefore, it cannot raise itself to God nor recognize His existence, even through things that are seen. Hence, it is inferred that God by no means be directly an object of science; yet, as far as pertains to history, that He is not to be considered an historical subject.” (DH 3475). Both the terms “science” and “history” need to be clarified. The term “science” is used here in the sense of a knowledge that is certain, the subject matter of a reason exercised in a rigorous way. Moreover, the modernists insisted upon history as the dimension within which religion and dogma necessarily express themselves and evolve, but at the same time they devalued the “historical” character of Revelation, or the ability to know the historical value of the interventions of God and the historicity of the very deeds of Jesus Christ, all in favor of a more spiritual and subjectivist relation between God and the individual called by Him. In the context of modernism, not only philosophical knowledge of God but also the very possibility of a divine revelation in history are considered as doctrines tied to forms of “intellectualism,” which need to be considered surpassed. For the document *Pascendi*, the agnosticism of the modernists leads to a scientific and historical agnosticism, understood as a preliminary and necessary passage towards a “religious experience” no longer founded on rite and dogma as normative expressions of a believing community and least of all supported by a philosophical and metaphysical knowledge, but rather solely based upon subjectivity (the principle of religious immanence, cf. DH 3477; for the theme of religious experience, see Section V in the article [Experience](#) [10]).

*3. The Second Vatican Council.* The teachings of the First Vatican Council and of St. Pius X regarding the negative effects of the agnostic position on philosophy as upon theology were taken up again by the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council dwells in a particular way on the consequences of agnosticism on the ethical and religious practical life of people today, virtually constituting as it does the cultural presupposition of the vast phenomenon of contemporary religious indifference. The pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, in recognizing that the agnosticism of contemporary culture assumes various forms and aspects not always able to be pinpointed with clarity, speaks nonetheless explicitly in reference to scientific thought: “Indeed today's progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth. By virtue of their methods these sciences cannot penetrate to the intimate notion of things. Indeed the danger is present that man, confiding too much in the discoveries of today, may think that he is sufficient unto himself and no longer seek the higher things.” (n. 57). Agnosticism is therefore seen above all as an outcome of a scientific progress that took science and its method as the supreme norm for the quest for the whole truth degrading all other knowledge to the standing of truths that are only probable, uncertain, and without a sound foundation.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) also dealt with agnosticism in the same line as *Gaudium et spes*. The catechism underlines how the practical attitude of indifference before God and the religious problem are a result of cultural and philosophic agnosticism: “Agnosticism assumes a number of forms. In certain cases the agnostic refrains from denying God; instead he postulates the existence of a transcendent being which is incapable of revealing itself, and about which nothing can be said. In other cases, the agnostic makes no judgment about God's existence, declaring it impossible to prove, or even to affirm or deny.” (CCC 2127). From a pastoral point of view, these fruits of agnosticism are quite relevant, because “agnosticism can sometimes include a certain search for God, but it can equally express indifferentism, a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience. Agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism.” (CCC 2128). Similar concerns about agnosticism, considered by the Church as a phenomenon of an ever-greater significance and one related

to the phenomena of atheism and religious indifference, have been expressed in numerous documents of the Secretariat for the Non-Believers, now the Pontifical Council for Culture.

4. *The Criticism of Agnosticism and the Need to Philosophize within the Faith according to the Encyclical “Fides et ratio.”* [The encyclical letter \*Fides et ratio\* \(1998\) of John Paul II](#) [11] synthesizes the Roman Catholic doctrine on agnosticism, but also complements it with a reflection on the relation between reason and faith that takes into account all the requirements of Christian thought, including its dramatic confrontation with modernity, and offers the foundation for a renewed reflection regarding the question of philosophical knowledge of God. Right at its beginning the encyclical outlines the situation that, “rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned” and “has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread skepticism.” (n. 5). The encyclical then develops its central theme, that of reaffirming the “metaphysical” rather than relative value of the truths achieved by human intelligence about God.

The document intends thus to confirm the traditional doctrine regarding the capacity of human reason to present, within the horizon of the philosophy of created being, “a full and comprehensive openness to reality as a whole, surpassing every limit in order to reach the One who brings all things to fulfillment.” (n. 97). *Fides et ratio* goes even further in firmly condemning the *ratio separata* of modernity, which “claims for philosophy not only a valid autonomy, but a self-sufficiency of thought which is patently invalid.” (n. 75, cf. also n. 45); and this because, “In refusing the truth offered by divine Revelation, philosophy only does itself damage, since this is to preclude access to a deeper knowledge of truth.” (n. 75). According to *Fides et ratio*, in regard to the knowledge of God, one ought to speak of a “Christian philosophy,” capable of joining reason and faith, philosophy and theology, the two “wings” with which man can elevate himself even to the mystery of God. “Recuperating the patrimony of Christian thought the relation between theology and philosophy must be realized ‘in the light of circularity.’” (*Fides et ratio*, 73). In this way, whether it be theology or philosophy, they would reciprocally help one another not to fall into the temptation of bridling in the dryness of a system the perennial freshness which is contained in the mystery of the Revelation brought by Jesus Christ. This Revelation will always present its drive of radical newness, which no one will ever be able to fully explain or exhaust.” (*The Magisterium of the Fathers of the Church according to the Encyclical “Fides et ratio”*, OR, November 13, 1998, p. 4). And since “no historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth, nor to be the complete explanation of the human being, of the world and of the human being’s relationship with God.” (*Fides et ratio*, n. 51), it follows then that only a philosophy capable of harmonizing itself with the faith is able to attain the fullness of truth. *Fides et ratio* takes into account therefore the two moments in which a Christian philosophy ought to articulate itself: the subjective moment, “in the sense that faith purifies reason” and which “liberates reason from presumption, the typical temptation of the philosopher. Saint Paul, the Fathers of the Church and, closer to our own time, philosophers such as Pascal and Kierkegaard reproached such presumption.” (n. 76); and the objective moment, which regards the contents of the same philosophical knowledge of God, in as much as “Revelation clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason. Among these truths is the notion of a free and personal God who is the Creator of the world, a truth which has been so crucial for the development of philosophical thinking, especially the philosophy of being. There is also the reality of sin, as it appears in the light of faith, which helps to shape an adequate philosophical formulation of the problem of evil. The notion of the human person as a spiritual being is another of faith’s specific contributions.” (n. 76). In other words, to revelation also pertains the manifestation of several fundamental philosophical truths that reason, left to its own devices, was incapable of reaching.

## IV. Agnosticism and the Possibility of a Discourse about God.

*1. The Knowability and Unknowability of God.* The correct interpretation of the Roman Catholic doctrine expressed in the documents cited above must be reached in the context of the whole of its ordinary magisterium and of the theological tradition of the Church in relation to the problem of the knowledge of God. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church have in fact unanimously held two truths simultaneously present in biblical revelation: they defended, on the one hand, the possibility of knowing God, proceeding in an analogical way and departing from creatures; and, on the other, the impossibility for human reason to know God in an immediate way and as fully distinct within his intimate nature. The two poles of such a gnoseological scheme are paradigmatically expressed by Scripture itself. The considerations brought forward by St. Paul in the *Letter to the Romans*, that “ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.” (*Rom* 1:20), stand side by side with the affirmation no less explicit in the *Gospel of Matthew*, “all things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.” (*Mt* 11:27), and the conclusion of the solemn prologue of the *Gospel of St. John*: “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.” (*Jn* 1:18).

Already the Fathers of the Church pointed out this twofold concern. On the one hand, they affirmed the knowability of God by means of the natural light of reason and by reflecting upon the works of creation; on the other hand, they paid equal attention to rescue the knowledge of God from every purely rationalistic or gnostic determination, which would have eliminated or diminished the mystery. One could say that this twofold patristic teaching regarding the “[knowledge of God](#) [8]” later developed as “affirmative theology” or apophantic, and as “negative theology” or apophatic, along the centuries has provided the foundation of the entire complex Catholic reflection on the problem. In fact, on the Christian scene, the concern to safeguard the dignity of human reason in its ability to know the existence of God cannot be separated from the corresponding and similar concern not to reduce the mystery of being and of divine life into purely rational categories. Not by chance did the whole patristic tradition of neo-platonic inspiration, whether Greek or Latin, consider as pride (*hybris*) every attempt to “understand” the mystery of God by means of reason alone. Augustine writes, “From the moment that we speak of God, why are you surprised if you don’t understand? In truth, if you understand, it is not God;” as a matter of fact, he continues, “once one attains to God (*attingere*) even a little with thought it is a great blessing; for in as much as to understand him (*comprehendere*), on the other hand, is absolutely impossible.” (*Sermones*, 117, 3, 5). John Chrysostom in his turn, in his sermon *De incomprehensibile*, even holds every effort wishing to “understand” God to be blasphemous. Pseudo-Dionysius, who greatly influenced the birth and development of negative theology in a determinant way, especially through the reception his work *De divinis nominibus* had in the theology of the Middle Ages, was convinced that “in dealing with divine things the negations are more truthful, whereas the affirmations don’t appear adequate to the secret nature of the ineffable.” (*Coelestis Hierarchia*, II, 3). In his *Mystica Theologia* he proposes a path of purification that reaches clear to the point of setting aside all sensible phenomena, all representations of forms or discourses, in order to ascend to the knowledge of Him who transcends all. The person who wishes to come near to the mystery of God “must detach himself from that which is visible and from those who see, and penetrate into the truly mystical darkness of ignorance. Remaining in this darkness, one must stop all cognitive perception and enter into Him who is wholly untouchable and invisible: at that moment it belongs truly to the one who transcends all, without being any longer of anyone, nor of oneself, nor of others; all knowledge having been ceased, one unites to the principle of the wholly unknown.” (*Mystica Theologia*, I, 3). And this is because God is not the object of any human faculty, that is, He does not

adequately correspond to sense, to imagination, to opinion, to discourse, or to knowledge.

2. *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas.* This doctrine, unanimous in the Fathers of the Church, received a clear formulation in the Latin tradition with St. Augustine and its definitive consecration with St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas writes, “As affirms Augustine, God flees every modality (*omnem formam*) of our intellect.” (*In IV Sententiarum*, d. 49, q. 11, a. 1, ad 3um), and since “the First Cause is superior to every exposition which one can do of It” (*Liber De causis*, prop. V), it is necessary to affirm that “the knowledge of God (*scientia de Deo*) does not belong to man.” (*In IV Sententiarum*, d. 49, q. 11, a. 7, ad 12um). Human reason can reach the point of knowing the existence of God and of several attributes of his nature, but will never be able to understand His essence, because this would simply result in the divinization of reason. This was in effect the error of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), whose philosophy claimed to express the very essence of the divinity, in such a way making human reason absolute and rendering it “divine.” For St. Thomas, on the other hand, interpreter of the authentic doctrine of the Catholic Magisterium, “we cannot know what God is [i.e. His essence] but rather what He is not.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, Prologue).

The doctrine of Aquinas on the knowledge of God by the natural light of reason, as well as that concerning the relationship between “negative theology or apophatic or mystical” and “positive theology or apophantic or affirmative,” knows how to unite the legitimate demands of philosophical reason, without giving way to rationalism, and the just claims of negative theology, without arriving at an agnostic apophaticism that would simply render God foreign not only to knowledge, but also to any relation of communion with human beings. For his great equilibrium here, one may say that Aquinas’ thought coincides fully on this point with the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Magisterium, as the acknowledgments given him by various documents, from *Aeterni Patris* (1879) to *Fides et ratio* (1998), bear witness.

The thomistic doctrine on the knowability of God can be summarized as follows: In the first place, human reason can adequately know the properties of created beings and, from its operations, also the spiritual nature of the soul, even if the same St. Thomas also acknowledges that “it is difficult to know what the soul is (*cognoscere quid sit anima, difficilium est*).” (*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 8, ad 8um). However, reason can adequately know the essences neither of corporal things nor of those spiritual, because such a knowledge presupposes the comprehension of prime matter and of freedom, and is therefore reserved only to the divine intellect, which is the first principle and the ultimate end of all creatures.

In the second place, human reason nevertheless can, with its proper forces and after having been sufficiently exercised, arrive at the point of knowing the existence of God and the principal attributes of His nature (eternity, simplicity, unity, spirituality, goodness, truth, etc.) and their relation to creation (omnipotence, omniscience, providence, etc.). The whole path of ancient philosophy, above all the great metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, bears witness to the fact that reason, departing from finite beings, is capable of arriving at the recognition that the foundation of all being is a transcendent first Principle, the cause of all that is, a supreme intelligence and Orderer of the cosmos. Yet St. Thomas points out that such knowledge is solely “indicative,” not “comprehensive,” because it is never fully adequate to the divine nature, which always exceeds the limits of human reason. This notwithstanding, it is still a necessary and truthful knowledge. “The truths that we confess concerning God fall under two modes. Some things true of God are beyond all the competence of human reason, as that God is Three and One. Other things there are to which even human reason can attain, as the existence and unity of God, which philosophers have proved to a demonstration under the guidance of the light of natural reason.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, ch. 3)



It follows then that the knowledge of God on the part of the natural light of reason, which in and of itself is finite and moves from the finite perfections of creatures, is a knowledge limited to the “fact that He is” (*quia est*), but unable to comprehend in an adequate way “what He is” (*quid est*), i.e., the divine essence. St. Thomas further acknowledges very realistically that such natural knowledge is reached not in an immediate way, but after much effort, and not on the part of all, but only by few, and that it is a knowledge mixed with error due to original sin (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a.1). Indeed, even though Plato and Aristotle arrived at an elevated knowledge of God and of His nature, they were unable to arrive at the truth of [creation](#) [12], which could be reached only by means of Revelation, even though much knowledge of the natural order is possible through observing creation’s effects.

To sum up, Aquinas joins with great equilibrium “affirmative theology,” which received a magnificent expression in the *Summa Theologiae*, and “negative theology,” above all in its Pseudo-Areopagite formulation, towards which St. Thomas showed great consideration, offering it an even greater systematic doctrinal foundation. In one of the initial pages of the *Summa*, he writes, “Now, since we cannot know what God is, but we can know what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, Prologue). And commenting on *De divinis nominibus* of the Pseudo-Areopagite, he affirms, “The highest thing, in terms of a knowledge of God, which we can reach in this life is that God is above all that we can think, and therefore speaking of God in such a way that proceeds by the way of negation (*per remotionem*), is the most apt way.” (*In De divinis nominibus*, I, 1,3).

I am therefore of the idea that Thomas Aquinas safeguarded the rights of reason and the rights of God in a marvelous way and probably as no one else in the history of Christian philosophy, offering a synthesis of thought that still today can furnish an illuminating response to the challenges of religious and theological agnosticism.

## V. Concluding Remarks

In the present day, agnosticism, especially in its consequences as reflected in philosophy and [culture](#) [13], seems to have put on the face of relativism in the philosophical sphere, and that of indifferentism in the sphere of the common mentality. The thesis that God —and, more generally, the unique [truth](#) [14] — cannot be known rationally (although received and grasped in some of its aspects or also from diverse complementary points of view) had its origin and systematic formulation in the West with the thought of Kant, and gave rise to idealistic, existentialistic, and nihilistic currents. Such a thesis has recently been joined closely together with very diverse forms of gnosis that know how to make the most all-embracing world-views and the broadest syncretism co-exist —as for instance in the [New Age](#) [15] movement —, at the expense of the significance of the central questions about truth and about the only God. From an initial gnoseological agnosticism, philosophical rationality little by little watered itself down, developing first towards voluntarism, then towards sentimentalism and vitalism, which placed their foundation more upon instinctive way of thinking than upon intellect. Although it might have intended thereby to safeguard those spheres of values that appeared essential for an ordered civil and social life necessarily open to the aspirations of pluralism, such a process led, according to the severe analysis of Husserl, to a true and proper bankruptcy of objective knowledge (cf. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 1954). Thus, as a first consequence of contemporary agnosticism, ethics (practical philosophy) has taken the place of metaphysics (theoretical philosophy), but it is nonetheless unable to avoid the problem of the justification of its own foundations, the resolution of which is being sought out today by means of a way no longer metaphysical.

In the field of theological reflection, agnosticism has primarily influenced the relation between faith and

reason in the theology of the reformed Churches, which are more inclined towards a discourse about God in which the priority of Revelation becomes the self-sufficiency of the Word of God vis-à-vis the demands of reason, and where the universality of the call of salvation is sought principally upon existential foundations (Luther, Bultmann) and much less upon the foundation of a reason or a nature common to all human beings. However, the relations between theology and agnosticism will always be delicate and the solutions not immediate, simply because the apophatic moment (*via negativa*) remains an irrevocable condition of theology's reflection upon God. However, the use of such a moment finds its completion, as for example in Thomas Aquinas, in the utilization of an affirmative way and of a way of eminence, guided exactly by that principle of the [analogy of being](#) [16] (*analogia entis*) towards which the reformers (Barth) have always shown less confidence. When the equilibrium of these different "moments" or "ways" of theological discourse become problematic, theology can end up embracing the prospect of a God who is not only inexpressible (as the Fathers, monastic theology, and Sacred Scripture itself hold), but ultimately unsaid (Heidegger) and, therefore, not communicable.

In the field of the sciences, it also needs to be pointed out how the philosophy of science has often projected upon science, or better upon its interpretation of scientific thought, the same consequences of agnosticism, conjecturing an interpretation of scientific theories in which experience and theory play a role ever more "instrumentalist" and ever less cognitive, arriving at the inevitable functionalism of a science held to be "neutral," and therefore more easily dependent upon the laws of economics and social politics. The fact that the natural and mathematical sciences are "hypothetical" and not apodictic, and thus require some ultimate foundations that are indemonstrable, fostered the idea that science could be used as a tool. Instead of being understood as points of departure towards a cognitive agnosticism, however, these indemonstrable foundations represent in reality the metaphysical presuppositions of science itself and, as such, are not able to be demonstrated from within the scientific method. For several years now, however, the problem of the foundations of the sciences has been becoming more and more pressing in this regard and the question of the real possibility of a self-founded foundation of all knowledge has been being asked again in rigorously logical-mathematical terms. It is exactly thanks to the reappearance of these problems that today the mathematical sciences seem to be opening themselves to the most serious logical and metaphysical questions in the search for a non-agnostic foundation for their whole system.

Already in the 19th century and up until even recent times, the Magisterium of the Church seems to have foreseen all the above in many of her documents, although the construction of a new system of philosophical thought that would overcome agnosticism was certainly not her task. In the present day, we need to ask ourselves whether agnosticism with its multiple consequences has not exhausted its philosophical charge, the origin of which one sees arise in the gnoseological sphere before that of the ethical or scientific, and whether it is not slowly changing itself into an ideology.

**Read also:** [Atheism](#) [2]

[Epistemology](#) [3]

[God, Natural Knowledge of](#) [17]

[God, notion of](#) [18]

[Truth](#) [14]

**Documents of the Catholic Church related to the subject:**

[Abbreviations and complete titles of the documents](#) [19]

DH 2751-2756; DH 2811-2814; DH 2841-2847; [Vatican Council I, DH 3004, 3026](#) [20]; Lamentabili, DH 3458-3459, 3464-3465; [Pascendi, DH 3475-3485, 3494-3495](#) [21]; [Gaudium et spes, 19, 57](#) [22]; [Fides et ratio, 5, 45, 54, 75-76, 97](#) [23].

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