

# An Interview with Professor Agnostini

Conducted by Bernard Josephson

Enquirer: Professor Agnostini, thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

A: You're welcome.

E: You say you are an agnostic?

A: That's correct.

E: Have you ever had a belief in God?

A: Not really.

E: Were your parents religious?

A: Not that I ever noticed.

E: Did they believe in God?

A: Probably in some limited way.

E: But you don't?

A: I've already explained that I am an agnostic. I am neutral on the question.

E: Neutral or undecided?

A: Neutral is the better term. I'm not trying to decide anything here.

E: Would indifference describe your state of mind?

A: Perhaps. Why be concerned about something or someone you can know nothing about?

E: Even if that party had some power over you?

A: I suppose even in that case. If you can't do anything about it, why concern yourself with it unduly.

E: But in the case of God, in virtually every religion in recorded history, there are many things you can do to win God's favor. Obeying the Ten Commandments, for example.

A: Sure, but your question has two built-in assumptions. First, you're assuming an agnostic has something to worry about when it comes to God. God is supposed to be loving, isn't he, all forgiving and so on. The second thing, which is the more critical, is that you're assuming he exists. My position is that if you're agnostic about God, you have to be agnostic about things like the Ten Commandments as well.

E: And about any idea of heaven and hell?

A: Of course. It's all unknowable so why be concerned about it.

E: Do you think Pascal's Wager makes no sense?

A: It makes no sense to me, that's for sure. And in fact, I don't know of anyone who believes in God on a shrewd gamble like the one Pascal suggests. And I can't imagine religious assent based such a motive would please God.

E: Well, that's arguable. Scripture has it that *fear is the beginning of wisdom*, but let me put the question another way. Would it please you to learn, of a sudden, that there is a God after all?

- A. That's an interesting question. I think I have to answer that I'm not sure it would matter to me, one way or the other. I haven't thought about it because I don't expect to experience your hypothesis.
- E. But it would be interesting to know how anyone could remain indifferent as to whether or not God truly exists.
- A. Why does that surprise you? Doesn't that indifference describe the great majority even of believers, at least in a relative way? I think my parents probably did believe in God in some dim way, but it meant nothing to them as far as I could tell.
- E. You are right, of course. But the question still remains. Let me ask you in another way. Why do you think for some people God is very important, to the point that they are willing to lay down their lives for Him, and for others, like yourself, apparently he appears to mean nothing at all.
- A. Well, I'm not exactly sure. But why do some people like Bartok and others can't stand his music? I guess it's a matter of taste. You can cultivate a taste for almost anything.
- E. The taste for God, as you call it, has been present since the beginning of history, until our age at any rate. Anthropologists have never found a culture without some form of religion. How do you account for that?
- A. Well, we don't know that everyone was religious, just because a culture had an element of religion in it. That's probably always going to be the case. People used to fear the forces of nature, storms, lightning, droughts; today maybe it's more just plain fear of what might happen to them. Ultimately it's the fear of dying, and so people project these fears onto unknown forces that seem to control and often threaten their lives. They want to neutralize them, keep them friendly. Not everyone thinks this way, mind you, and many probably never did. Some people take out insurance policies and see the doctor once a year. Others pray or whatever.
- E. You have no fear of anything that might happen to you?
- A. Not really. Sure, I have anxieties. Everyone does, even believers. But normal anxieties don't drive my kind to a belief in a god who controls everything, in the hopes that he'll watch out for us or something.
- E. Has it ever occurred to you that God does watch out for those who believe in him?
- A. I can't say I have. We would have seen some hard evidence for it if that were true.
- E. Well, believers have the experience that He does. Can you accept their testimony?
- A. I guess I can accept the fact that they make these claims. I don't accept there is any evidence their lives are any different. They get sick and die just like everyone else, don't they?
- E. Believers claim they have peace and joy, even in the face of death. The martyrs sang hymns in the face of lions and tigers.
- A. But what does that mean really? Peace and joy are pretty relative terms, aren't they? Are you suggesting unbelievers cannot face death with equanimity? That no one else experiences peace and joy in their lives?

- E. Yes, I agree, the terms are relative. But believers will tell you that the peace they have is different in kind, a peace “not as the world gives,” and so is their joy.
- A. OK, so we agree on something. Everybody’s different. What does it prove?
- E. Believers also say that they feel loved, not just by another person, or their dog, but by God, the author of life, the source of every good thing.
- A. Good for them then.
- E. Is that all you have to say?
- A. What am I supposed to say, that I don’t feel loved?
- E. Well, do you mind telling me, do you feel loved?
- A. Obviously not, not in that sense.
- E. And is that a matter of indifference to you, being loved or not being loved.
- A. You know something? Love is a mixed blessing. I’m divorced, for example. Love has its up side and its down side.
- E. I take it that the down side is that love sometimes turns into something else.
- A. You can say that again.
- E. I mean that your problem is not with love itself, but with the lover.
- A. Fair enough. But God can turn against us too, right? I’ve read the Bible.
- E. What have you read that tells you that?
- A. In Isaiah, it says God is the author of both good and evil. Read the stories. He’s always smiting someone or other.
- E. But you say you don’t believe in God.
- A. That’s exactly right.
- E. How can you not like something about him, then?
- A. I could never believe in that kind of god, that’s for sure.
- E. Would you believe in a different kind of God, who didn’t smite anyone for example?
- A. I go back to my original statement. I’m an agnostic. I don’t like to speculate about something that can never be decided.
- E. Because there’s no evidence?
- A. Because there’s no evidence, exactly. And it’s not likely there will ever be.
- E. What sort of evidence would satisfy you?
- A. (hesitates) I’m not sure what would convince me. I’d have to give that some thought.
- E. Are you really saying, in effect, that nothing would ever convince you?
- A. No, of course not. But I’m not sure what form the evidence would have to take. I’ve never thought about it that way.
- E. Do you know what the evidence is that’s there now?
- A. There isn’t any as far as I can see.
- E. What about miracles?
- A. I don’t accept the miraculous, and I don’t know anybody who does. There’s no one on this faculty who would ever admit to miracles. Not even the few theists.
- E. What about events that are inexplicable in natural terms?
- A. I don’t believe there are any such events. In some case, we just don’t understand the circumstances well enough.

- E. What about healings that confound medical science?
- A. Just because we don't understand the natural processes doesn't mean they don't exist. Who says these are miracles? No book of science speaks of them.
- E. What about the dancing sun that 70,000 people saw at Fatima in 1917?
- A. I have no idea what you are talking about. If something like that ever happened, it would be mass hysteria.
- E. What about bleeding hosts?
- A. I know nothing about that. What is it?
- E. What about the image of Jesus Christ on the shroud at Turin. Have you heard of that?
- A. I read something about it somewhere. It was shown to be a fake, wasn't it?
- E. To the contrary, it has scientists completely baffled.
- A. Not any of the scientists around here. I doubt they even know about it.
- E. What about something in the natural order, like that fact that religious families are healthier, happier, even economically better off on average.
- A. Yeah, I've heard the slogan: the family that prays together stays together. My view is that they have the causality backwards. The family that stays together prays together. Their religious feeling is a function of their contentment as a family, not the other way around, like icing on a cake.
- E. I have the feeling that even if God appears in the sky and declared himself with one miraculous event after another, you wouldn't believe. Am I wrong?
- A. Why doesn't he, if we want people to believe in him? It would certainly make things a lot easier for people.
- E. Would you believe?
- A. I guess I would have to.
- E. That's why He doesn't work that way. He wants people to believe freely, of their own free will. He won't force you.
- A. Then he shouldn't mind if there's an agnostic or two in the crowd, right?
- E. So are you saying then that you don't believe in God because you chose to not believe?
- A. I don't think I said that.
- E. No, but isn't that what it comes down to?
- A. I don't see it that way.
- E. Well, you don't believe and no kind of evidence seems able to make you believe, at least not any kind that you can identify, except maybe the sort of evidence that God might force down your throat. But he's not interested in that kind of follower. So belief is up to you, and your answer, as far as I can tell, is "I think I'll pass."
- A. Look, I said I'm an agnostic. I don't reject god. I just don't believe in him, that's all.
- E. Have you ever looked for God? He said "Seek and you shall find."
- A. Where would you look?
- F. Have you ever asked Him to show Himself?
- A. Can't say that I have.
- E. Have you ever prayed?

- A. Agnostics don't pray, surely you understand that.
- E. Would you say then that you don't believe there is a God because you never tried to find Him?
- A. Are you suggesting it's my fault? That's absolutely silly. I never look at the sun but I sure know its there.
- E. You know, there's another thing that believers get from God.
- A. What's that?
- E. Their identity. They know who they are, where they came from, where they are going, why they are here.
- A. I suppose they think they do.
- E. And you are agnostic about these things too, I gather?
- A. Well, there are no easy answers to any of those questions, far as I can see.
- E. Would you say, then, that you are an agnostic not only about God but about yourself?
- A. You know, there are people in this University who deny there is even such a thing as self.
- E. And you?
- A. Well, as you say, I am an agnostic.
- E. About both God and self?
- A. Yes, I guess so, if you want to put it that way.
- E. And are both issues matters of indifference to you? You said that about God. True about self also?
- A. Look, this discussion has gone on long enough, don't you think?
- E. OK, whatever you say, but thanks for this conversation. It's been quite interesting.
- A. You're not welcome.

