

OpenTheo

What Questions Would You Ask to Engage an “Agnostic Atheist”?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to engage someone who calls himself an “agnostic atheist” and how to deal with a parent contradicting you with heretical theology while you’re teaching students in a confirmation class.

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Transcript

[Music] Welcome to Stand to Reason’s #STRask podcast. I’m Amy Hall and with me is Greg Koukl and we’re here to answer your questions that you send us on Twitter with the #STRask. So Greg, you’re ready for the first question.

Amy, I’m ready. Thanks. Alright, here’s a question from Robert.

On TikTok Live, I keep seeing people claiming to be “agnostic atheist.” I believe it’s an attempt to dodge any burden of proof. What tactical/colombo questions would you ask to engage them? This is a very good observation and I agree with you. I’ve heard Michael Schurmer say, Michael Schurmer, founder of Skeptic magazine, author of quite a number of books, advancing atheism aggressively against theism, especially Christian theism, saying he’s not an atheist, he’s an agnostic because he doesn’t know God doesn’t exist.

Now, he’s got a PhD in sociology or something like that. Nevertheless, I want to be charitable here and just simply say that this isn’t a deceptive maneuver but he just hasn’t thought it through because belief, believing something is so, is not the same as knowing something is so. That’s a completely different issue.

Theists, most theists would probably say they don’t know for sure that God exists. But

that doesn't mean they're not theists. That doesn't mean they're agnostic.

An agnostic or a theist or an atheist has to do with belief and not knowledge. So let me just say this again. It has to do with what someone believes is the case, not what someone knows is the case.

Now knowledge is justified true belief, JTB. That's the standard definition. It's the best that anyone's come up with at the time.

That means if you know something, it's got to be true or else you don't know it. It's not knowledge of it's not true. But it's not just that and you must believe it to be so.

So you must believe something that you say you know. I mean, this is no duh. But it can't be just a shot in the dark to call it knowledge.

You have to believe it with good solid justification. Okay, that's where the justified part comes in and justified true belief. So all knowledge claims are a subset of beliefs, but not all beliefs are knowledge.

Okay, you can believe all kinds of things that are wrong. But there are some things that you believe that are actually true and well justified and you can call them knowledge. Now, Michael Schurmer believes that God does not exist because what you don't do is you don't write a whole bunch of best selling books about things you have no opinion about.

He believes God does not exist. So if you believe God does not exist, that makes you an atheist. If you don't know one way or the other, in other words, if you don't have enough knowledge to form a belief, I got to write this down.

Don't have enough knowledge, because I'm writing this something about this knowledge to form a belief. Then you are agnostic. All right, nothing tricky about this at all.

Michael Schurmer is not an agnostic. And these, these maneuvers, I think, are rhetorical devices to evade issues like burden of proof. So I think a question here is maybe this.

I'm writing as I'm talking because I'm actually, I'm sorry, but this is just the way I do these things. And I think better on my feet than sitting in front of my computer trying to write a chapter. This is going into a chapter in a book.

So are you saying you have no opinion about whether God exists or not? There you go. Are you saying you have no opinion about whether God exists or not? That's a question. And then they're going to say, oh, well, no, I have a point of view.

All right. I presume, I mean, if they're genuinely atheist, they're going to say, so you don't campaign for the idea that there is no God. Or maybe if you're campaigning, there's another question.

If they are campaigning, which they are, if you're campaigning for the idea that there is no God, I presume you believe there is no God. Okay. Which is the case? Well, the definition of an atheist is someone who believes there is no God.

So why wouldn't that make you an atheist? Notice that's a question. I mean, I'm putting a little information in place, and then I ask a question. And I'll write it anymore.

I'm just going to get the mp3 of this. And see what they say. But here is the deal.

And I'll give you the categories. And I got this from Doug Givitt, philosopher at Talbot, and it's excellent. And this relates to the broader issue of people who say they're an atheist is someone who lacks a belief in God.

I don't have a belief in God. Right. Well, you don't have a belief in God, but that's not what an atheist is.

An atheist is someone who has a belief about God, and the belief they have about God is that God does not exist. So once they're not exclusive categories, a person who has no belief in God in all of these cases is someone who has no belief in God because they believe God does not exist. So they do have a belief about God, and that belief about God that they have qualifies them for the definition of atheist.

And there's nothing tricky about that at all. Okay, back to Doug Givitt. Doug Givitt says, give one statement and actually written a mentoring letter on this.

Although we don't archive mentoring letters, I guess. But he says, let me, you know, I'm going to role play this now for you, how I would do the question in the tactical form. So let me ask you a question of the atheist.

Let me ask you a question. Okay, I'm going to make a statement and I want you to weigh in with your view. And, and, and I just want to make the observation that you have only three logical possibilities.

Okay, you could either affirm it. You could deny it. Or you could withhold.

In other words, you were not in a position to affirm or deny. Therefore, you withhold. The only options.

Yes, no. Don't know. That's the middle one.

Yes, no, don't know. That's the only options logically. Okay.

This, as Daniel Dennett says, the atheists are the brights. They're the logical ones. All right, let's, we'll talk about these logical categories.

Now the foundation is set. Here's the question. Or here's the statement to which you

want them to respond.

God exists. Or there is a God, something to that effect. So what say you regarding the statement, there is a God.

Do you, do you affirm that first? No, I don't affirm it. Okay. Do you withhold any opinion of any sort about it? No, obviously.

This is where they might squirm a little bit. But in the case of Michael Shermer, Michael, you're in print in a number of different books in which you are not withholding. You are denying the truth of the statement.

There is a God. If you deny the truth of the statement, there is a God. That means you believe there is not a God.

And if you believe there is not a God, you are not an agnostic. You are an atheist. Now you may not know whether your belief is true or not.

That's not relevant to the question of what category you fall into. Because the category regarding these things is determined by what you believe, not by what you know. And so this move that many are making say, "Well, I'm an agnostic because I don't know.

For sure there is no God." That's a manipulation of language that is not consistent with what the terms mean. Agnosos, agnostic, not knowing. But whether one is a theist or an atheist is not based on knowledge.

It's based on conviction or belief. QED. So Greg, that post that you wrote is called "Do Atheists Lack Belief in God?" So they can find that on the website.

Thank you for noting that. I just want to add another, I mean, that will definitely help them to understand. You'll definitely help them to clarify where they're coming from with those questions.

Another way, the thing that might be helpful here is if you first start with just the basic Colombo question. What do you mean by that? Get them to describe what they mean by agnostic atheists. QED.

"Wait, Amy, you're doing Colombo better than me right now. Turn them out here. No, you're right.

I affirm." Well, because what they might do is if they're going to stress this idea that they don't know, you can use that to your advantage. So if you can get them to commit to the idea that they're open to evidence, that they're open to hearing evidence, that they just have not heard any evidence, you could say, "Oh, great." Well, then, if you're open to hearing what I have to say and you're just not aware of the evidence, then let's have a conversation about this since you're open to that, since you're not settled on a view. And

so you can possibly use that whole, their own label as a way to open up a conversation.

Right. That's good observation. And by the way, there are agnostics.

There are people who just don't, they don't know and because they don't know, they have not adopted any belief. Okay? But there are a lot of people who don't know, but they strongly believe this is the case. And it's their belief that qualifies them for either theist or atheist, not their knowledge.

If a person is genuinely agnostic, they are not weighing in on either side. They are neutral regarding this. They have no belief or view.

And these also are completely perfectly open, presumably to the evidence that Amy was just describing here. But if a person is really an atheist and they say they're agnostic, then I think Amy's point is even better to try to flush out the dishonest use of language. And that's really what it is.

If you can get past the use of labels and get into, have them explain what they believe in other terms, that might be a way to get around it. Yeah. But yeah, Greg, there, of course, there are agnostics, of course.

But as soon as you're saying, "I'm an agnostic atheist," now you're using contradicting terms in the same label. Well, yes, the way the language is used. But all that saying, all they mean is, "I believe there is no God, but I don't know there is no God." I mean, that may be all they're saying.

Well, that's okay. Well, then they're an atheist. I mean, they're not an agnostic with regards to the question of belief.

And that's why it's a misuse of words, as you pointed out, Amy. So that's great, Greg. Help them to make a distinction between belief and knowledge and then go from there wherever they describe themselves.

Yeah, and those questions will help. And Robert, thank you for the question. I'm not going to footnote you, but these ideas will show up in print by the end of the year, God willing.

Okay, Greg, here is another tactical question from Trey. How would Greg deal with a parent contradicting him with heretical teaching/thinking while he was teaching students in a confirmation class at a church? This happened to me last night. There were time constraints, too.

I didn't think to start asking questions, but I'm wondering if maybe I should have. I'm curious what STR would suggest. Well, it's a little hard now because I don't have any content about what the issue is.

Apparently they were learning something in Catechism class or confirmation class and the notions that were being promoted were contradictory. But that's... So he was teaching the person who said in the question was teaching a confirmation class. Okay, got it.

And the parent spoke up and started contradicting him and saying things. He clarified a little bit in email to me that it had to do with the gospel in Grace versus works. So the parent was actually saying something seriously heretical, like a works salvation.

And so the parent speaking up, well, he's trying to teach the kids, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that because there wasn't a whole lot of time. Okay, well, I think that this is where it's kind of a judgment call. Sometimes you're going to get somebody intervening like that because they're confused and they're looking for clarification of what you mean.

And this particular... And so if I were teaching a class like that and someone, the adult is going, "Wait a minute, I'm confused." Okay, well, then I'll say, "Okay, thank you." And I'll offer the clarification and start to move on. Because maybe some kids are confused about this too. But what it sounds like is going on is a parent is contradicting the teaching.

And this circumstance, it would be best... I'm just thinking how I would react in that situation. I would say, "Mr. Jones, I think this would be better if we talked about this in private." The confirmation class is meant to reflect what the church here teaches is so.

Okay, if you have a disagreement with that, we can talk about it in private, but this isn't the right venue for that. So, we can talk afterwards, okay? Okay. And then if he persists, this is where... I guess... I mean, it's hard to predict how belligerent people are going to be in an environment.

It seems strange that a parent would bring his child to a confirmation class and then belligerently contradict the teaching in the class. And so I'm just thinking that what would I do if they were continued to be belligerent? Maybe I just say, "Okay, I'll let you have your say, and then I'll respond to it for the whole class and then we're moving on." So this is a variation of the steamroller, okay? You get to say your thing, "I'll listen, I'll respond, but this isn't the place for a debate, and then we move on." And if they don't want to move on, then it might be if you... Mr. Jones, if you really strongly disagree with this point that is central to our teaching here, then maybe your child doesn't belong in our confirmation class. I don't know what else to say, because you can't let a parent change the foundational teaching of your church community, and you can't let them continue to interrupt.

So this is why hopefully the belligerents is not so intense that it continues on after a fairly strong statement like that. This is what we teach, and we have reasons for it. If you

disagree with that, then this may not be the place for you or for your children, but that's your call, Mr. Jones.

That's your call. What isn't your call is what we teach. Would you do that in front of the kids, or would you do that after? Well, it depends what option is offered me by the belligerent parent.

If the belligerent parent is continuing to interrupt and won't accept my offer to talk privately, I have no other choice. Okay, offer your thing. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Okay, great. You've had your say, "Thank you." And here is my response, and then we're going to move on. Will that be okay with you? Okay.

Now, if he's not satisfied with the response, this is okay, then you differ. But if he continues, then the question is, then if you feel this strongly about this, Mr. Jones, it's probably best that you take your son or your daughter out of this class. Mm-hmm.

I don't know what else to say. But you don't want, is this, you do not want that parent, monopolizing or taking control of the class. That is the teacher's class.

This is where I think a teacher has to be gentle, but firm. Mm-hmm. I think that's good advice, Greg.

I think what, if I found myself in that situation, probably the first thing I would say would be to stop them and say, "You know, I think I might not be understanding you correctly because I think we might have a disagreement here." But let's talk afterwards so I can get some clarification before I respond. That way, you take it away from, you know, this is just what you're saying, Greg, you try and move it to after the class. Right.

And then I would say probably, and then I can open with that topic next time, because if they have already said something that's confusing, you're going to want to address it in the next class. Maybe you could start with that and say, "Hey, in case anyone was confused about this thing that was said, here's the church's view on this topic." Yeah, especially if you could talk to him, he continues to disagree and he pulls his kid out. Then he's not there.

I think this step of damage control, depending on how intense or confusing the encounter was before the students, that may be necessary. That's a good point. Mm-hmm.

Well, thank you, Greg, and thank you, Robert and Trey. We really appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, sit it to us on Twitter with the #strask.

All one word, #strask. Thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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