

Enchanted agnosticism

by Kirk J. Schneider from *Tikkun*, Vol. 18, July-August 2003

Let's face it: with regard to faith and ethics today, we're between a rock and a hard place. The rock is extremist-fundamentalist religion and the hard place is postmodern free-market anarchy.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to these debilitating excesses which have the world in a vise-grip; I call it "enchanted agnosticism." Agnosticism has a long and many-layered history. In recent times it has come to be associated with scientific doubt (or the unverifiable); but there is another kind of agnosticism that takes doubt, and particularly the mystery of being, a step further. I call this alternative enchanted agnosticism. By enchanted agnosticism, I mean bedazzled uncertainty, exhilarated discernment, and enraptured curiosity; I mean the openness and skepticism of science wedded to the zeal and exaltation of religion; I mean the veneration of mystery wedded to the solemnity of responsibility. To put all this in philosophic terms, I mean our existential faith in the inscrutable.

Enchanted agnostics believe that behind every institutionalized religion is a transcendent question, "But what is beyond that?" Our answer is that behind every bounded faith resides an evolving, indefinite faith. Beyond every bounded god resides an expanding, indecipherable god. Captivating as they may be, gods and goddesses, idols and icons, obsessions and fixations are but pale stand-ins for the inscrutable. Even concepts like the Absolute or Atman or the Void – to the degree they are decipherable – are but veneers of this mysterious power. As Paul Tillich put it in *The Courage to Be*, veneers (or pieces) of the holy must not be identified with the holy itself, which is a "God beyond God."

This radically new view of God, being, or creation is a view that trumps nihilism as it does dogma; purposelessness as it does certitude. It is a view that basks not in particular things, but in the amazement, astonishment, and bewilderment with things. Whereas definable gods (such as those in the Old and New Testaments, ancient myth, and popular culture) tend to polarize us, either by containing and belittling us on the one hand, or inflating and exaggerating us on the other, the inscrutable fosters wholeness – not puritan or absolute wholeness, but dynamic, paradoxical wholeness. The inscrutable evokes our humility and our possibility at the same time, but instead of dictating these conditions from on high, it inspires us to negotiate them, to find our way within them. The result of this understanding is that devotees of the inscrutable are more inclined to see through their investments and be less driven by them. They are less entrapped – either by false hope or false despair – and they are enlivened by a poignancy to life, an overview, that heightens each attendant moment. Enchanted agnostics are the leaders-to-be of a new spiritual consciousness.

Three Principles

Faith in the inscrutable combines three intertwining perspectives: the magnificence of creation, the mystery of creation, and our responsibility to creation.

Magnificence

We don't need a directive or a definable god to feel the presence of divinity. The magnificence of creation demands it. That creation exists at all is magnificent, amazing, incomprehensible. So too, all that partakes in creation must be seen as equally amazing, equally magnificent – death as well as life. This magnificence measures the span of humanity's hope, and demands the tolerance that comes from being open to awe.

As Whitman reminds us:

Grand is the seen, the light, to me – grand are the stars,
Grand is the earth, and grand are lasting time and space,
And grand are their laws, so multiform, puzzling, evolutionary,
But grander far the unseen soul of me, comprehending, endowing all those ...
(*Leaves of Grass*, n.d.)

Mystery

The flip side of magnificence is mystery. One of the greatest dangers of our age is jadedness. The more jaded we become, the less we acknowledge Mystery; the less we acknowledge Mystery, the more we lose touch with its current and with the inscrutable itself.

Magnificence and Mystery are a pair. We cannot have magnificence without uncertainty, and we cannot have mystery without hope. This paradox is often overlooked in mystical circles, which sometimes emphasize magnificence to the detriment of mystery, but was familiar to Tillich, who points out in *The Dynamics of Faith* that mysticism neglects "the separation of man from the ultimate. There is no faith without separation."

With separation comes anxiety; faith must live with this sense of unease. Uncertainty reminds us of our fragility, but it also reminds us of our possibility. Again, Tillich:

[F]or man is finite, and he can never unite all elements of truth in complete balance. On the other hand, he cannot rest on the awareness of his finitude, because faith is concerned with the ultimate and its adequate expression. Man's faith is inadequate if his whole existence is determined by something that is less than ultimate. Therefore, he must always try to break through the limits of his finitude and reach what never can be reached, the ultimate itself.
(p. 57)

Responsibility

Creation's magnificence leads us to such foundational religious concepts as respecting the stranger, venerating God, and so on. Mystery however, leads us to responsibility, the challenge to respond. The call of magnificence can be answered by reflexive, even passive, approaches to worship. Mystery however, calls us to what Ernest Becker describes as reflective, even dialectical worship (see his 1974 interview with Sam Keen in *Psychology Today*). Once we understand the mystery of the inscrutable, we understand that each of us, as individuals, must bear the brunt of decision-making.

We enchanted agnostics cannot passively defer to authority because there is no certain authority to accept our surrender. There is no marked path, no "highway to heaven," no inviolable canon. It is we who must sanctify the scripts, we who must find the path. But we are not rudderless when it comes to this process either; faith in the inscrutable does provide landmarks. The first, following Magnificence, is an appreciation for all being; the second, following Mystery, is an openness to what evolves; and the third, following Responsibility is a challenge to respond to or discern what evolves. That which Tillich calls "listening love" (which is akin to depth therapy as well as Buber's philosophy dialogue) is a concrete realization of the aforementioned principles. "Listening love," elaborates Tillich in *My Search for Absolutes*, is a whole-bodied immersion in a dilemma or concern. "It is a listening to and looking at the concrete situation in all its concreteness, which includes the deepest motives of the other person...." Tillich concludes, "The more seriously one has considered all the factors in a moral decision, the more one can be certain that there is a power of acceptance in the depth of life" – and in our own lives, I might add, for the decision we risk.

The responsibility to respond compels a mutable respect, a respect that leans on humanity. Just as one can't apply a "fits all" product to a diverse and opinionated populace, one can't force a "fits all" ethic to a complex and changing existence. Instead, the principle of responsibility that is at the heart of enchanted agnosticism calls upon the deepest energies of democracy, the fullest engagements of dialogue, and the keenest perceptions of context.

Nor is the principle of responsibility a kind of "situational" ethics, as that approach is conventionally understood. Enchanted agnosticism advocates an "awe-based" situational ethics, an ethics infused by the thrill and anxiety of living and the reverence, humility and wonder of living. While other situational ethics tend to resort to intellectual or consensus-based criteria, an awe-based ethics is ever attuned to the whole, the embodied, and the relational in its deliberations (as in listening love, or person-to-person encounter).

The Way to the Inscrutable

Enchanted agnosticism is thus very different from the reflexive faith of disciples, or the expedient faith of marketers, or the obsessive faith of fanatics (or even G.W. Bush's faith-based education!). Faith in the inscrutable is wrought from our encounter with these and other, singular faiths. It is a faith wrought from the encounter with the myopic, the fleeting, and the one-dimensional – a faith wrought from pain but not confined by pain. It is a faith born of deep self-inquiry, deep presence to the results of that inquiry, and deep trust in the unfolding of the results. It is a faith born of confidence that one can survive one's own intense grappling, but it is not just a faith in survival; it is a faith in that which permits survival to occur.

Awe-based faith entails a "giving up when there's nothing left," as Ernest Becker put it in 1974, a placing of one's trust in the "tremendous creative energies of the universe" to work through and with us when we are spent.

The key here is that such faith often requires that we struggle until we are spent. Struggle jolts the system, dents the armor, and jars the rails. But struggle is only the beginning. The shock and the awakening we experience are only preparatory. The next crucial question is how we pursue, engage with, and emerge from this struggle. We must learn to acknowledge, identify with, and yet somehow be more than that with which we contend.

Expediency, the catch-word of our time, is not a route to the inscrutable. It is a route to the definable, the consolable, and the delimiting. One cannot partake of the fruits of vibrancy, of the profound and the emancipating, through gimmickry. There are no tricks to cultivating awe. The danger today is that we delude ourselves into believing in such tricks; that we mistake Isaiah Berlin's jigsaw puzzle universe for the brute and throbbing one into which we are thrust. Almost every cutting-edge technology poses this danger – virtually every designer drug, genetic manipulation, and robotic innovation holds the potential for abominable self-delusion. While we can be aided and, indeed, miraculously transformed by these developments, we must not lose touch with their partiality and their envelopment by the inscrutable.

Vision

If enchanted agnosticism were to become the norm, then, how would the world look? I envision a time when enchanted agnosticism is echoed in schools and in temples, in boardrooms and in embassies, in bedrooms and in alleyways – in every human sphere. This would be a time when churches throw open their doors to mosques, and mosques to synagogues; when Buddhist priests can perform sacred chanting rites before Hindu congregants; and when Jewish temples sanction Protestant services. It would be a time, perhaps, when every major denomination would regularly and on a rotating basis host every other major denomination and yet maintain their respective identities; when families of all faiths and backgrounds would pray together, break bread together, and partake in each others' heritage.

This would also be a time when enchanted agnosticism – awe-based living – is practiced in business and diplomatic circles; when politicians and mediators and entrepreneurs model the actions they expect of others; when they partake in interfaith ceremonies, avail themselves to intimate interchange, and open up to diverse folk traditions. Then, and only then, will the spirals of hate, of tit-for-tat, and of intercultural estrangement be stanchd. Then and only then will conciliation have a chance.

Further, this would be a time when diplomatic and trade meetings are attended not only by policymakers, but also by ethical philosophers, spiritual leaders, and organizational psychologists; when, for example, attendees participate in professionally facilitated process groups and promote frank exchanges of feeling; and when the input from scientists and philosophers matches that from legislators and generals. It would be a time when representatives can broach each others' personal fears as well as state or corporate agendas; when international relations can be spoken about in terms of interpersonal relations; and when hopes and trepidations can be coupled with predictions and averages.

Finally, this would be a time when people everywhere approach each other and our world from a stance of curiosity, wonderment, and potentially even attraction, for commensurate with the rise in enchanted agnosticism would be the corresponding rise in intra- and inter-cultural reassessment, trust, and cooperation, and with these developments, entire worlds will unfurl. Religious and scientific types, for example, would begin to perceive not only their respective divergences, but also their respective convergences, utility, and virtues. While adherents of doctrinal faith would reassess the value of openness and skepticism, devotees of calculation would reevaluate the legitimacy of veneration and faith; while spiritualists would rethink material realities, materialists would revisit the ethereal, poetic, and felt. Although hesitant at first, each of the respective parties would become increasingly appreciative of the others' legitimacy, lucidity, and sublimity.

Sound remote? Out-of-reach? Not necessarily. Social theorists from Carl Rogers to Michael Lerner have been promoting such interchanges for years and many have partaken of their fruit. As more partake in *The Great Conversation*, fewer will pine for *The Great Detonation*, or *The Holy Vindication*; and as some invite deepening and widening, others will permit risking, opening. In short, enchanted agnosticism – the embrace of mystery – has tremendous potential to address the confusion and spiritual hunger of our lives.

In her illuminating study of religion, *The History of God*, Karen Armstrong concludes that we in the West have reached a developmental milestone. We have witnessed the disasters of fundamentalist tyrannies and, equally, of post-Enlightenment oligarchies, and we are in need of something different. This alternative, Armstrong suggests, just might be what she calls "mystical agnosticism," which is very akin to my "enchanted agnosticism." The problem, Armstrong cautions, is that in order for such an alternative to be viable it must be "felt upon the pulse," or as Buber put it, "hallowed in the everyday." That is precisely the challenge that I pose to TIKKUN readers today: to feel enchanted agnosticism upon the pulse.

Kirk J. Schneider is an adjunct faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School, author of *The Paradoxical Self*, senior editor of *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*, and author of the forthcoming *The Fluid Center*. © 2003.