



**UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY**

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6  
 Forums are usually with Canon Richard T. Nolan  
*retired philosophy & religion professor, editor of www.philosophy-religion.org*

**TOPIC: "VARIETIES OF ATHEISM"**

*Different forms of atheism (including "religious atheism")  
 how is agnosticism different? is atheism immoral? is science atheistic?  
 can an atheist be elected to a high political office?  
 what about clergy who are atheists?  
 can an atheist be an ethical USA citizen?*

*A Prayer To Be Said In Unison*

**Almighty God, who has committed to your holy Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**May 17<sup>th</sup> Forum with Fr. Paul A. Rasmus**

**"Risking Interventions In Someone's Life"**

*Possible subtopics: interventions for suspected or real substance abuse; wanting to help someone in various circumstances - whose needs are to be met - the one offering/providing care and/or the recipient? Justifications and risks in taking initiatives - especially toward a person who seems to be living in complete denial of their circumstances; The factor of personal privacy, including the "right" to be self-defeating; The perils of total dependence on God and leaving everything in God's hands; The responsibilities for self-care.*

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## TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH GOD

from *LIVING ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY* (9<sup>th</sup> edition)

### BELIEF IN GOD

#### *The Nature of God*

“Do you believe in God?” has become a common question. A simple “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not sure” might appear to be adequate, but further probing could indicate that these are less-than-satisfactory responses. Unless explained, the meaning of the word “God” for the questioner might be different from that for the respondent; the person asking the question could mean “an energy force,” the individual responding could mean “a spiritual essence within.” Without some explanation, communication of ideas does not take place.

Belief in God, in one of its many forms, has occupied a central position in religious faith and practice. Humans throughout the ages have felt a sense of dependence on someone or something beyond their own resources. This sense of dependence may manifest itself in many ways, depending on the intellectual and cultural development of the individual or group. The non-literate tribe smears a stone with grease to appease their deity; Plato expresses reverence for the Idea of the Good; Muslims kneel and pray to Allah at various times of each day; worshippers participate in praise of God in synagogues and cathedrals; mystics reach that “dreamless sleep” of the soul’s liberation—in all these there is a similar goal, a relationship with ultimate reality, or the “Sacred Ultimate.”

### THREE ISSUES

There are three basic issues associated with belief in God: God and the Idea of God, worship preceding ideas, and the incompleteness and insufficiency of ideas.

1. *God and the Idea of God.* There is a difference between God and any idea of God. To say that God *is* means that there is an objectively real God independent of human needs and ideas. By definition, God is ultimate reality and exists whether or not humanity exists.

However, *ideas* about God are human attempts to explain or interpret God. Convinced of the objective existence of God, theologians and some philosophers attempt to “put God into concepts” for the purpose of clarification. Their explanations or ideas are symbols about God; but because symbols change from culture to culture, ideas about God or ultimate reality vary. It is possible that some or all views about God bear little, if any, resemblance to objective ultimate reality.

2. *Worship Preceding Ideas.* Humanity worshipped a God or gods long before doctrines and philosophical problems concerning God arose. When people discovered other groups with different ideas of God, they were led to ask which ideas, if any, correctly represented God. With the growth of knowledge, some of the older conceptions came to seem inadequate. Thinking people were forced to defend the older views, modify them, or give them up.

3. *The Incompleteness and Insufficiency of Ideas.* No individual’s view of God is either final or complete. Our knowledge is growing and incomplete. In addition, we find it difficult to express satisfactorily some of our deepest convictions. The religious person is likely to say that what he or she discovers is not propositions but a relationship with the Sacred.

### TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH GOD

Let us clarify some of the terms used in discussions about the nature and existence of God.

Theism is the belief in a personal God who is creator of the world and a participant (immanent) in its processes, and with whom human beings can enter “I–Thou” relationships.

Monotheism is a form of theism that proposes *one* such personal god; polytheism says there is more than one God.

**Deism**, a form of theistic belief popular among eighteenth-century and contemporary people, emphasizes the remoteness (transcendence) of God from the world. Several of the founding fathers of the United States were deists, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Thomas Paine. God is the creator and lawgiver, who permits his creation to administer itself through natural laws. This view has been called the “watchmaker view” of the universe: God creates an instrument, the natural universe; he permits it to operate without his interference or participation. A rigorous deist does not view any writings, including the Bible, as revelations from God or participate in private or group prayer to the “absent God.” However, many less rigorous deists pray or seek inspiration from group participation on sentimental occasions or in times of crisis.

**Pantheism** is the belief that God is all, and all is God. “God” is the name we give to all things taken in their totality. The pantheism of the European Middle Ages held that because “God alone truly is, all that is must in some sense be God, or at least a manifestation of God.”

This form of pantheism remains personal; in some sense God is believed to be “someone.” A different view of pantheism understands God as the *non-personal*, universal spirit that is total reality; here, too, all existence is in God. Both the personal and nonpersonal forms of pantheism understand total existence as an all-inclusive divine reality.

“**Panentheism** says that all is *in* God, somewhat as if God were the ocean and we were fish. If one considers what is in God's body to be part of God, then we can say that God is all there is and then some. The universe is God's body, but God's awareness or personality is greater than the sum of all the parts of the universe. All the parts have some degree of freedom in co-creating with God.” (inserted within this handout)

**God-As-Goodness** is the notion of God as a metaphor for some kind of all-encompassing goodness. This view is accepted by many contemporary intellectuals who reject all forms of theism and mysticism. This concept of God is concerned with how we ought to live; among intellectuals living in Western civilizations, an emphasis on community and social responsibility is central to notions of God-As-Goodness.

**Agnosticism** means “not knowing.” It continues to be used most frequently in a religious sense. “We do not know whether there is a God”—such is the agnostic’s suspension of judgment about God’s existence. It is possible neither to affirm nor to deny God’s existence.

The term **atheism** (without God—*a theos*—or Godless) has a different meaning; the atheist asserts there is no personal God. Far from being a suspension of belief, atheism is the firm conviction that God does not exist.

The views represented here are fundamental ideas about the nature and existence of God. Each has several schools of thought, and most can be found in some form in all the major religions of the world. Philosophers and theologians have for centuries debated the merits of each view and whether one best captures the nature of God in a given heritage.

## THE HEBRAIC VIEW OF GOD

Throughout their history the Hebrew people perceived different relationships with God; love, mercy, justice, and awe characterized God’s relationship with Israel. That God is the someone who creates what comes into existence is a continuing conviction of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The God of Israel is not a crude projection of a human being; rather he is perceived as the creative intelligence who fashions reality and reveals his purpose for humanity through chosen agents and events. The “personhood” and other human characteristics of the Hebraic God as portrayed in the Bible and Qur’an are not intended to reduce deity to mortal dimensions and limitations; rather, they portray vividly a God who is *someone*, not *something*. An extension of this view is represented in the following passage:

The categories which come to the fore in this interpretation of God’s nature are person and the various qualities essential to personality, . . . God is literally related to his creation, affecting

and being affected by it, is literally involved in space and time, literally suffers and literally intervenes in the historical order to bring about the accomplishment of his purposes so far as he can. God is a free, personal being with various super powers. . . . God has all the essentials which constitute personality.

[F. B. Dille, "Is Myth Indispensable?" *The Monist* 50 (1966): 589. See also "The Attributes of God within the Witness of Scripture" in B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), pp. 371ff.]

As symbols of God reflecting their cultures, words such as "Father" and "He" were used in holy writings and in prayers by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Male symbols conveyed a personal God in language acceptable to those peoples. "It" or "She" would have failed to communicate their experiences of God. The intention was never to equate God with a mortal male or a "man in the sky." In fact, the writers of the Bible and Qur'an were not speculating about the essence of God; they interpreted his nature only in terms of his activity. Their accent was on his sovereign will, not on his being.

The systematic, intellectual presentation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam accompanied reflections apart from their holy writings. Theologians sought to proclaim God's revelation to their own communities of faith and to the world; philosophers attempted to arrive at truth independently of revelation. The theologians worked from their scriptures and the experiences of their religious communities; philosophers, aided by reason, reached for God as well. The two tasks were occasionally blended in one person's efforts, such as in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

Because the categories and methods of formal, scholarly philosophy were unknown to the Hebrew mind, the modes of thought developed by the great Greek philosophers entered the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim intellectual efforts at various stages of their respective histories. Concerns with essence, substance, and attributes became an aspect of the three religions. A focus on God's *being* accompanied emphasis on his *activity*. The God of Moses who delivered the Hebrew people from Egyptian captivity was also understood in terms of Aristotle's "pure form" and "uncaused cause."

[The entire chapter from which the above was adapted is at: <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/philosophy/18.pdf> ./]

#### ATHEISM from *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*

The term "atheism" is as slippery to define as it is fraught with emotion. Doubtless, these two facts are intimately entwined. In part the problem in defining atheism rises from its relativity—as a negative term to the denial of varying positive religious frameworks in which God or the gods are differently understood. This makes atheism dependent on historical setting and community belief. In part, the problem of definition also rises from emotions stirred against a perceived challenge to deeply felt community beliefs: "Atheist" has often been used as a term of abuse.

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570–500 B.C.E.) was widely reviled as an atheist for poking fun at the anthropomorphic foibles of the Olympian deities accepted by the orthodox in his day. It did not alter his classification as an atheist that he affirmed a single, motionless, non-anthropomorphic god, cited approvingly by Aristotle two centuries later. Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500–428 B.C.E.) was prosecuted and condemned to exile for atheism because he denied the divinity of the heavenly bodies and, instead, insisted that the sun and moon were glowing stones, the sun even larger than the Peloponnesus. Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.), too, was condemned and was executed as an impious atheist despite his acknowledgment of personal spiritual guidance from a divine agent.

Other examples of the protean character of atheism abound. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), though the "God—intoxicated philosopher," was excommunicated as a Jewish heretic by his synagogue (1656) and was denounced by Moses Mendelssohn for his "atheism." Paul Tillich, though a Christian theologian, was considered an atheist by some for his rejection of any belief in God as "a being over against other beings," but he was not so considered by others, because of his affirmations of the "God beyond the god of theism."

Recognizing the inescapable dependence of the term on historical setting and circumstances and avoiding any abusive overtones, our definition will be explicitly relative to what might be called "minimal Judeo-Christian theism." Atheism in this sense is defined as rejection of belief in the existence of a cosmic reality—whether literally infinite or merely vast beyond human conception—of whom religiously important personal attributes like knowledge, purpose, action, goodness, or love can be at least analogically or

symbolically affirmed. This rejection can be of two sorts: first, rejection as disbelief, in which arguments may be given for the logical impossibility, empirical improbability, or theoretical implausibility of belief in such a cosmic reality; or, second, rejection as dismissal, in which theistic utterances are held to be cognitively meaningless, not qualifying for belief or disbelief and thus not a fit basis for ordering policies of life or for worship.

**Arguments for Disbelief. 1. Arguments for the logical impossibility of the existence of God depend, like any a priori argumentation (that is, arguments from the necessity of ideas rather than from evidence of experience), on a careful definition of the God-idea that is held to lead to the logical contradiction or necessary incoherence that rules out belief. The dual task of a priori atheist arguments of this sort is to show that the definition offered is legitimately derived from genuine religious theism and, at the same time, fatally flawed.**

Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, observes that the God of theism must be believed both to possess a maximum of secure reality, that is, a maximum of "being" of the strongest conceivable sort, and simultaneously to possess a maximum of interiority—of freedom, thought, love, and self-awareness to an eminent degree. If God were lacking in either of these aspects, God would not be the God that theists adore. But, Sartre points out, the two aspects are mutually incompatible. Secure being is the sort of phenomenon that can be "in itself" only by being entirely solid, ponderous, closed to possibilities of being in any way other than it is. Self-awareness, on the other hand, is the sort of phenomenon that can be "for itself" only by being a sort of nothingness, pure possibility, radical freedom. But to try to combine them constitutes a contradiction! What we want in a God is a projection of our own thirst to link impossibly the two aspects of ourselves between which we are torn. We are dangerously free, like it or not, and we wish—passionately—that we could at the same time be something solid. We attribute such an ideal, unreachable unity to God, but this projected God of our existential anguish is a "useless passion." Sartre's atheism, in consequence, is theoretically necessary. If the underlying Sartrean categories of "being" and "nothingness" can be shown not to be compelling, however, then the impossibility of belief in God on this ground vanishes.

Another example of an a priori argument less dependent on special background assumptions for the logical impossibility of belief in God is John Findlay's ontological disproof. He points to the religious requirement that God—to be worthy of worship—be absolutely perfect in all ways, including the way in which God exists: God must not exist merely contingently (the possibility of God's not being would be a terrible imperfection), but necessarily, as Anselm recognized and made the basis of his ontological argument. But, Findlay asserts, modern logic has shown that since all existential statements are contingent, "necessary existence" is an oxymoron. God must be conceived as enjoying necessary existence, but necessary existence is ruled out in principle. Atheism is required, therefore, since any God worthy of worship turns out to be impossible. This a priori argument for disbelief in God, like the first, rests on a theoretical framework, though an even wider one than Sartre's. Its key theoretical assumptions are that all existential propositions are included within the class of empirical propositions and that all empirical propositions are contingently true. This fundamental framework is no less open to rejection than the first if, for example, synthetic a priori propositions can be defended or if some existential propositions simply do not share the logic of empirical ones.

**2. Arguments for disbelief in God may, in addition, be grounded in a posteriori modes of reasoning (that is, arguments from the evidence of experience). Assuming the inconclusiveness of the so-called theistic proofs, the atheist position pushes beyond indecision toward a negative judgment. In the foregoing section we saw how the traditional ontological argument can be reversed in an attempted a priori disproof of the existence of the allegedly Necessary Being. Likewise, but in an a posteriori mode, the traditional cosmological argument, arguing for the existence of a First Mover, can be counterattacked with an appeal to modern empirical science in which motion is no less self-explanatory than rest and in which cosmological theory has come to depict the universe's origins in an impersonal Big Bang rather than in divine purpose. The traditional argument from design, from an atheist's perspective, is even more vulnerable to counterattack. Not only does evolutionary science offer an alternative, impersonal explanation for orderliness and mutual adaptation within the biological world, but also close observation reveals maladaptations, extinctions, and vast domains of suffering.**

The problem of evil, raised in one of its sharpest forms by this counterattack against the argument from design, is a mainstay in the atheist's arsenal against the probability of an all-powerful and all-benevolent God. Given the evidence as a whole, containing not only adaptation and beauty but also plague and earthquake, birth defects and innocent suffering among both humans and animals, how could any rational mind infer a

perfectly well-intentioned intelligence in full control? As David Hume allowed, it may be possible by sophisticated argument to "square" these empirical findings with the hypothesis of theism, but surely no reasonable inference directly from our mixed data to an unmixed, perfect God is possible. Therefore, barring a priori information about a hidden God purposely veiling divine perfection behind a most imperfect creation, atheism would appear to hold the balance.

3. Even if a strong probable case for atheism is difficult to work out, because of the vastness of the range of relevant evidence as well as conceptual problems in quantifying relative likelihoods in this domain, suspension of judgment (such as is advocated by agnosticism) would not be warranted as long as the theoretical plausibility of belief in God is weaker than the plausibility of disbelief. A belief becomes implausible when it is gratuitous or redundant or arbitrary, even if probabilities cannot be exactly counted. In the spirit of Laplace's retort to Napoleon, that he had "no need for the hypothesis" of God, modern atheists find no need compelling them to introduce references to the divine in their accounts of reality. Jacques Monod, for example, argues that a complete story of living things can be told with reference only to molecules operating according to chance and necessity. Paul Edwards asks why we should be asked to suspend a negative judgment in connection with gratuitous claims about the Judeo-Christian form of theism any more than we should continue to suspend such judgment about similarly gratuitous claims concerning the gods of Mount Olympus or about the devil or witches.

**Arguments for Dismissal.** The most radical form of atheistic argument in the twentieth century has been the dismissal of theistic language as empty of possible belief—content. The characterization of this position as atheistic is sometimes rejected on the ground that, if theism cannot be affirmed, then neither can its contradictory. But this objection is somewhat mischievous, at best, since if the logical dismissal of theism succeeds, then what is left is a world devoid of God-talk and full of science-talk—which is exactly the outcome sought by more traditional atheistic arguments.

The classic statement of the argument for dismissal was made by A. J. Ayer as part of his general condemnation of metaphysical discourse on behalf of logical positivism. The key doctrine of logical positivism is the equation of factual meaning with actual or possible verifying experience. Mere tautologies do not carry factual significance, since they are true under all factual circumstances; all true sentences in logic and mathematics can be classified as more or less elaborate tautologies. Likewise, mere emotional outbursts do not carry factual significance, since they simply express the feelings of the utterer. Non-emotive, non-tautological language will have to carry any factual significance, and this will turn out to be exhaustively expressible in terms of the sorts of experience that would tend to verify the assertion of a fact if it is true. This can be expressed in a principle: namely, that the meaning of a factual proposition is equivalent to the method of its verification.

But it is clear that language about God has no ready method of verification. If anything is verified, it will be by mundane human experience. "God"—if more is intended by the term than such actual or possible experiences as the regularity of seasons, or the orderliness of the astronomical bodies, or the feeling of satisfaction upon performing certain actions mandated by ecclesiastical organizations—is never verified as God. Anything that could be so verified would be indignantly denied as truly God by theists; thus, by making God transcendent in principle, theists remove all factual meaning from God-language. And if it is impossible to assert truths about God in a philosophical tone of voice, it is equally impossible to "believe" them "by faith." According to this doctrine of meaning, there is literally nothing to be believed.

This verificational analysis of meaning fell onto hard times in the later part of the twentieth century, since (among other problems) it could not account for its own non-tautological, non-emotive, apparently assertive (but not empirically verifiable) meaning. But a closely related challenge to the unfalsifiability of theistic claims forced careful rethinking by theists. If, as Antony Flew demanded, every possible state of affairs is compatible with theistic belief—if, that is, nothing could conceivably falsify such claims—then is anything definite being claimed at all? What is the "bottom line" difference between a theist and an atheist? Has theism died the "death of a thousand qualifications"?

A remarkable episode in twentieth-century Christian theology occurred when certain theologians took all these criticisms to heart and embraced the "death of God" within their theological work. The movement, extending mainly through the decade of the 1960s, was highly diverse in method and content. Gabriel Vahanian was misunderstood if considered an atheist at all; Paul M. Van Buren blended dismissive elements

from logical positivism with Barthian neoorthodoxy; Thomas Altizer affirmed genuine atheism of a most unusual sort, holding that God had in fact died at a point in history in order to set human history free and to save it; Bishop John A. T. Robinson spoke of the absence of God "out there" but retained an impenetrable Tillichian ambiguity about what might be real "deep down" at reaches of being accessible only by subjectivity.

Atheism, though mainly a minority opinion, has flourished in different forms since the rise of critical thought in human history. Various atheisms abound in our own time. It is wise to remember that by the standard that condemned Anaxagoras to exile we would all be declared atheists. That the moon is made of rock is not, after all, religiously shocking in the setting of theism today.

The circumstances of theistic belief are constantly changing, though the changes are often too slow or complex for a living generation to notice. One of the agents of this change within any historical setting is the atheism of its time. Atheism, as primarily a counterattacking position, is the critical voice that constantly opens new possibilities for thought about the ultimately real. When this voice is heard with care, new possibilities of theism may be suggested. What shall 'God' mean in the future? Every meaning of 'God' presupposes a theoretical framework of some sort, old or new, familiar or alien. Within these frameworks, whether derived from A. N. Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Teilhard de Chardin, or some other source, God-talk is provided its function and is related to other domains of thought and life. Atheism is the rejection of some specific sort of God-talk, whether by disbelief or dismissal. As long as such rejection is encouraged to be clearly articulated, theological dross is subjected to cleansing fires of criticism, and the human project of relating cognitively and practically to the most high and the most real is advanced.

FREDERICK FERRÉ

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### HOW MANY NONBELIEVERS?

Surveys may be undercounting the number of atheists and agnostics in the US

By John Allen Paulos *The Los Angeles Times* Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Are there more atheists and agnostics in this country than is commonly supposed? Two studies -- last week's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey from the Pew Forum and one published two years ago -- suggest so.

The 2006 study from the University of Minnesota does not examine the question of how many non-believers there are but rather makes clear the troubling depth of Americans' distrust of them. Asked whether they would disapprove of a child's wish to marry an atheist, 47.6% of the 2,000 randomly selected people interviewed said yes. When asked the same question about Muslims and African Americans, the respondents' "yes" responses fell to 33.5% and 27.2%, respectively, and the responses dealing with Asian Americans, Latinos and other groups were lower.

When asked which groups did not share their vision of society, 39.5% of those interviewed mentioned atheists -- again, a level of distrust far in excess of that shown to other groups. Sociologist Penny Edgell, the study's lead researcher, called the results "a glaring exception to the rule of increasing tolerance over the last 30 years."

The recent study by the Pew Forum reports on the religious affiliations of Americans. It notes that the percentage of self-declared Protestants, although still a bit over 50%, is shrinking; that Catholics make up just shy of 25% of the population, a figure that would be declining were it not for recent immigrants; and that the number of denominations is rising. The study also notes a significant increase in movement from one religious affiliation to another, with almost half of the 35,000 people who participated in this extensive survey saying that they had switched religions.

Of interest to me, however, is that almost one in six (16.1%) of the respondents said they are not

affiliated with any particular religious faith, and this figure rises to one in four for 18- to 29-year-olds. Of course, unaffiliated does not mean irreligious, but 4% of Americans say exactly that, with 1.6% and 2.4% describing themselves as atheists and agnostics, respectively. The remaining 12% who are unaffiliated are split more or less in half between those who say they are secular and unaffiliated and those who say they are religious but unaffiliated.

Let me put the two studies together and speculate a bit. Given the negative attitudes toward atheists documented in the Minnesota study, and considering that most people probably don't see much advantage in incurring the distrust of their religious neighbors and colleagues, the testimony of many people formally classified as religious is suspect. Some nonbelievers, it seems to me, are likely either to lie and say they belong to some established creed, or to fudge their responses by saying they're spiritual and believe in a nebulously defined God, or are simply unsure.

Whenever surveys, especially surveys of sexual practices, religious beliefs or potentially unpopular opinions, ask people to self-report, the results are dubious. Few American men acknowledged suffering from erectile dysfunction before the introduction of Viagra, yet as ads assure us, millions of motorcycle-riding, party-loving cowboys seem to suffer from it now.

There is also a definitional problem. The question of religious belief is a nuanced one, and different people who hold similar beliefs and are willing to tell the truth will nevertheless give different answers depending on how they interpret necessarily ambiguous questions.

The conclusion I draw is that the number of nonbelievers in a conventionally described God is in the tens of millions and is not limited to angry "neo-atheists" and Madalyn Murray O'Hair clones. Moreover, I think a more fruitful distinction than the one between atheists and theists is the one between those who acknowledge that there are no compelling logical arguments for believing in God (even if they choose to believe anyway) and those who are sure of their God and the literal truth of their particular holy book.

There is a bravery and a wisdom associated with disbelief and honest doubt. As my father used to say, "Uncertainty is the only certainty there is." More biting is William Butler Yeats' line: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

*John Allen Paulos is a mathematics professor at Temple University and the author of "Innumeracy" and, most recently, "Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains Why the Arguments for God Just Don't Add Up."*

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See also <http://www.religioustolerance.org/atheist4.htm> /.