

“God.” What is that?

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I have a confession to make. I am confused. For most of my 72 years people have talked to me, from time to time, about god; and in all of that time I have never been quite clear on what it is they are talking about. In fact, probably the main reason I profess for not believing in god is that I don't clearly understand exactly what it is I am urged by the god-believers to “believe in.” Oh, people have given me definitions, but even after reading or hearing the definitions, I am still “unclear on the concept.” To illustrate what I mean, let's start out with a fairly standard definition from my unabridged Webster's Dictionary:

“God – noun. Any of various beings conceived of as supernatural, immortal, and having special powers over the lives and affairs of people and the course of nature...regarded as eternal, infinite, all-powerful, and all-knowing; a supreme being.”

The “special powers” referred to in the above definition are agreed to by most theologians (those who study this mysterious “god concept”) as consisting of (1) all powerfulness—omnipotence, mentioned above, (2) all-knowingness—omniscience, also mentioned above, (3) “infinite”—also characterized as omnipresent, and (4) all-benevolence, or all-lovingness. This fourth characteristic, unaccountably not mentioned above, is also known as omni-benevolence. Some more modern liberal theologians would classify god, whom they would agree “exists” in some unfathomable sense, not as a “being” but more as a “spirit.” I'll spare the reader a lengthy and pointless discussion as to how something might be said to exist as either of those two options, and what might possibly be thought of as “the difference.”

In an attempt to be all inclusive, I am aware of two other conceptions about, or versions of, the god concept. God for the deist is simply the mysterious force that got everything started. This god/force is not something that intervenes in the affairs of humankind, nor does it answer prayers, nor does it espouse any dogma. This deist god had no sons, nor did he dictate any texts. A well-known late eighteenth century deist (not an atheist) and patriot, Thomas Paine, also considered the deist's god as a sort of “source” of all moral authority—the fountainhead, if you will, of all that is good, benevolent and just. Secondly, the god of the pantheists is conceived of as the sum total of all there is, with a special emphasis on nature. In other words, the universe, nature, all that exists IS the same thing as god. These latter two conceptions of god—the deists' god and the pantheists' god, are distinct from the gods of any of the Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Islam, or Judaism—because they have no attributes or characteristics that further define them. Therefore, these two types of god concepts might be thought of as tautologies. Tautologies are simply self-describing expressions like, “God is ‘the force,’” or “God is love” or “God is everything,” or one of my “favorites”—God is “the ground of being.” Now, what the hell is that supposed to mean? Obviously, such descriptions or definitions are valueless simply because they don't really say anything. They are equivalent to saying, “God is god.” We will be concerned here with only the god or gods who have attributes and are said to cause on-going effects.

As soon as one begins to try to understand any sort of god that has attributes and is said to have effects on how we humans live and interact with our environment and each other, then we immediately run into problems. The most immediate and long-recognized problems ensue when it is recognized that an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful god allows things like wars, pestilence, devastating earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. to occur, often killing thousands if not millions of his apparently favorite creatures whom he created, it is said, in his image. Even though the cross-negating effects of this god concept's supposed powers of omniscience, omnipotent, and omni-benevolence has been well understood for at least 2,300 years, it seems to have had little or no effect on the general public complete willingness to "buy" the concept. The most well-known rendering of this unsolvable paradox was done by the Greek skeptic philosopher, Epicurus (341 – 270 BCE), when he scribed the following famous syllogism: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omni-potent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

Besides these obvious internal conflicts, there is simply the nonsensicalness of the idea that some form of consciousness could somehow exist outside of a functioning, blood-nourished brain. Clearly, what we call consciousness—as opposed to something one might call "artificial intelligence"—is a necessary prerequisite in order for the possessor of such consciousness to know anything, and with that knowledge, make judgments and then, somehow without any physical form, take action; that is, intervene in worldly affairs, thus using its power. Nothing in my life experience up to this point has made it possible for me to blithely accept such blatant nonsense.

And then there is the vocabulary problem—the words that my god-believing friends frequently use. I have great difficulty understanding what is meant by many of them. Some of these difficult-to-understand words are incorporated in the very definition of the god concept itself. They are abstract words which refer to intangible or even non-existent—as far as I can tell—things. A couple of examples would be the words "spirit" and "soul." I have found no scientifically verifiable evidence for what I am told a spirit is, or what a soul is. In other instances, I am confused by many adjective noun combinations in which the noun is something I understand, but the adjective is vague or completely indefinable. Two examples would be "revealed knowledge," and "spiritual" or "supreme" combined with "being." I understand the words "knowledge" and "being," but the adjectives seem to negate the meaning of the very words they modify. As far as I am able to determine all of our knowledge is and has always been acquired through our five senses. "Revealed knowledge" implies that one just "gets" the knowledge from some indefinable supernatural source, presumably from this mysterious "god" the existence of which is what we are attempting to verify. Secondly, I understand what a "being" is. Webster's defines it as a "living thing." However, I can not distinguish between a "spiritual being" and expressions like an "imaginary being," such as the fabled unicorn, or mythical beings, such as Hercules or Santa Claus. All such adjectives clearly put the noun "being" outside of the realm of something that truly exists. Therefore, we can certainly speak of supernatural or mythical beings, but I don't see how we can claim that they in some sense "exist," except in our imaginations. I hasten to add that I think imagination is a wonderful thing. I'm all in favor of magical and mythical stories. However, I do also believe that both the story-

teller/reader as well as the receiver of such stories must be clear about the fact that such stories are indeed imaginary.

Finally, after many years of puzzling over the problem, I confess my ignorance. Despite my best efforts, I still don't fully understand precisely or even anything near precisely, what the god-believers mean when they utter the word "god." It strikes me that this impasse continues to exist as a result of one of two possibilities: Either (1) I simply do not have the intellectual capacity to understand what they are trying to explain to me—in other words, I am just too stupid to "get it," or (2) my god-believing friends come from such a vastly different gestalt or point of view that we simply do not share enough commonly held understandings, meanings for words, etc. such that we can effectively communicate. How the god-believers have come to this entirely disparate point of view with its many different word meanings is itself interesting to ponder. When I talk with them, many seem to have very clear understandings in their heads, which make perfectly good sense to them, for words or phrases like "soul," "spirit," "revelation," "holy ghost," "divine intervention," etc. It has become clear to me that we do not share common understandings of these and other words which point to a Platonic "second world" or "other realm" of existence. Most philosophers since the time of Aristotle have accepted the "this world," which can be discerned and understood through our senses, point of view. Christianity comes out of a Platonic, two-world point of view. The true believers in the Christian religion seem to have at least large parts of their brain operating in this more ancient orientation or viewpoint, while at the same time living and functioning in this modern science-based secular world which functions from the one-real-world point of view. I'm not sure how they manage it, but many seem to navigate this course fairly well. What amazes me is how many people—what percentage of the U.S. population for example—seems to be "stuck" in this two-world orientation, especially since it was so long ago abandoned by at least those folks who seem to be the real social and scientific "engineers" of the modern world. Indeed, science itself would not be possible in a two-world paradigm. Given this fact, I am always further amazed that something like 85 percent of the U.S. population do not "self-describe" as atheists, or at least "non-religious." The good news is that in the latest highly respected American Religious Identification Survey of 2001, 14.1 % of the U.S. population check the "none" box when asked about their religion. This has grown remarkably since in the ARIS poll of 1990 only roughly 8% identified with this category.

My original thesis is that I cannot "believe in" the god concept because I simply do not understand what the god-belief advocates mean when they use the word "god." I have, however, concocted a sort of parody definition so that I can be clear about what it is I do not believe. It is as follows: "God – noun. Scientifically classified—tongue in cheek, of course—by the early twentieth century freethought writer and publisher, E. Halderman-Julius as a 'gaseous vertebrate.' However, the 'gas' is so widespread that it appears to have virtually no atomic weight. It abides in a realm never located; has a consciousness and thus knowledge without a brain, and powers or characteristics (i.e. omniscience, omnipotence, omni-benevolence, omnipresence) that are not only never demonstrated but that also are in many ways logically incompatible with one another."

Given the above definition, this has helped me—and I hope you—to clarify my thinking regarding my stand or viewpoint in relationship to the god concept. In my youth I had many questions. I therefore claimed to be an agnostic. I no longer have these questions as to the

existence or even possible existence of what I understand to be “god.” (See above definition.) Therefore, I can now more confidently proclaim, “I am an atheist.”

I would like to close with a related suggestion that we atheists and scientific thinkers have an obligation to do whatever we can to improved efforts on the part of secular society to educate our youth in the modern, post-Platonic, scientific point of view or orientation. I believe, in short, that beyond and in addition to our fight for “separation of church and state,” we as citizens and activists have an obligation to support and encourage our public schools to do a much better job of teaching scientific materialism, the scientific method, and “how to think” much more than “what to think.” As a critical part of this activism, we need to be vigilant in speaking up for barring from our classrooms the idea that there are such things as other-worldly, so-called “revealed truths” or “religious truths” which, in some areas, students are urged to consider as parallel to and equally as valuable as scientific truths. The renewed push to teach “creationism,” now re-labeled “intelligent design,” would, of course, fall into this category of beliefs. In plain language, we need to be sure we are diligent in getting what Thomas Edison called the “bunk” out of education.