

WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD? 2

Lesson II | What We Mean by God and Answering Some Objections

Review

1. *What were the three ways we come to know things?*
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2. *The phrase “I’ll believe in God when Science can demonstrate his existence” is an example of _____ because...*

Objectives for this lesson:

- We will be able to distinguish what the Christian means by “God” and what he doesn’t mean.
- We will be able to answer some common objections about God’s existence.

Key Vocabulary:

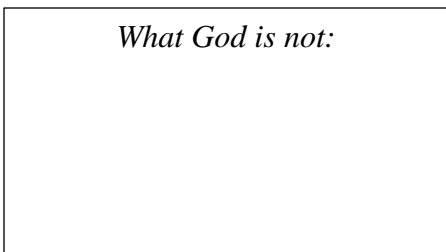
Agnosticism: The philosophical perspective that says it is unlikely that there is a God. Agnostics question the certainty of God’s existence.

Theism: A philosophical perspective that says there is a God.

Atheism: The philosophical perspective that says there is no God.

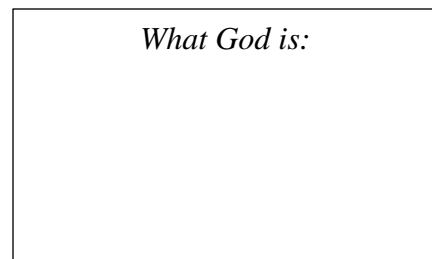
What Christians means when they talk about God:

What God is not:



versus

What God is:



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When we talk about God, one of the most helpful moves to make is to clarify what we mean by the term God. Admittedly, this is not as easy as it might sound because when we talk about God we are talking about something that is more unlike us than almost anything else we could think of.

The Judeo-Christian understanding of God is distinct in several ways. First, *God is not a thing in the universe*. In the book of Genesis, the inspired author goes to great lengths to make this point. God *creates* the heavens and the earth, the sky and the sea, the land and the vegetation, the stars and the moon, the birds and the fish, etc. The simple point here is that God is *not any of these things*. That is a critical point when we compare the Christian God to other non-Christian religions. Many other religions might worship god in the form of created things but not so for the followers of the Old Testament. God is outside everything in the universe.

That is already quite a step forward but let's go one more step: God is not *a being, rather he is being itself*. He does not possess being as quality, rather he is what in philosophy we call unconditioned being itself.

Perhaps the simplest way of saying that is to look at the name God revealed to Moses: "I AM WHO AM". That is a strange name. The phrase "I AM" is the first person conjugation of the verb "to be" which is another way of saying "being itself". God is that which nothing greater can be conceived.

Here's another way of saying it: *God plus the universe is not more than God by himself*. God is not a quantity. After all, if he were a quantity, you could easily think of something greater than God but just adding one thing. But God is not like that because he's not a thing in the universe. All of the sudden Genesis may be more puzzling than we thought.

Taking this one step further, *God is not 'the biggest thing around'*. Sometimes we are tempted to put God into the kind of categories we have for the world around us. Ants are tiny beings, and dogs are bigger beings, and elephants are bigger still. Then there's Mt. Everest, which is an even bigger being. The ocean is even bigger than that. And all of these beings are dwarfed by the solar system, which is a tiny being compared to the universe.

And God is bigger than that right?

Wrong, because God is not a thing like the ant, or the dog or the mountain or even the universe. All these things are *beings*, they have some amount of being and that amount varies when compared to other things.

But God does not possess being, *he is being*. What this means is that God does not have to *compete with any of these things in the universe*. God is non-competitive sheer act of "to be." The ant and the dog and the elephant are beings that take up a certain amount of space and they can't occupy the same space at the same time. They are *competing* for the same space in this way. But not God, God can be present to all things and not take up "any space."

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Again, if we look at how God appeared to Moses we get a hint of what this might look like. God speaks to Moses in the burning bush, a bush that is on fire but is not consumed. Right away, Moses knows something intense is going on. That's what God can do when he comes into creation. Creation is not moved out of the way, God is not in competition with it. But creation become luminous, just like the bush was still itself and yet it was "on fire" with God's life.

This is making my head hurt! Why do we need to insist on this point of who God is and who God is not?

If your head is spinning a little at this point it's not because you missed something. This is the God of the Bible! He is not easily domesticated by our minds. He is a "strange notion." We really can and should ask ourselves "Why do I need to know this?"

The first reason is that this tiny exercise gives us a taste of how far beyond God is from anything in the world we live in. It's a dose of humility for our minds. There is a saying from Saint Augustine, "Si comprehendis non est Deus", or "If you think you understand it's not God." If you've grasped it entirely you're not dealing with the real God.

But the second reason is because *many times the objections that are raised to belief in God assume a different kind of God than the one we mean in Christianity.*

For example sometimes you will hear atheists or agnostics claim that religion and God are shackles that are keeping humans from being free. In fact, one of the battle cries of classical and modern atheism is that if we would just get rid of religion we could finally reach our potential which, up to now has been limited. For them, God is just the projection of what we wish we could be. Saying no to God is saying yes to man, as Ludwig Feuerbach famously said.

This position, in all of its variations, assumes God is *opposed* to the freedom of human person, as if we had to choose between God and religion on one hand or man and freedom on the other. But we just saw that this is precisely what God was not. In Christianity God is not in competition with man. Instead, God wants to effect a whole new mode of existence for humanity.

Going one step further in the biblical history, we see this in startling clarity. In the Incarnation, when God enters into humanity, he does not obliterate it. Rather, Jesus is fully God *and* fully man. God and Man are not opposed but rather *united* in the divine person of Jesus.

The same could be said in a different way for the Virgin Mary. When she says "yes" to God and lets him into her life, she does not stop being human. Instead, she becomes the *most* human and the *most powerful* and the *freest* creature that is ever lived.

To sum it up in one phrase Saint Irenaeus said "the glory of God is man fully alive". When God draws close he does not enter into competition or violently displace us. Instead he enters gently and raises us up to another pitch. Little wonder then that one of the favorite titles for Mary in the early Church was the "burning bush". In Mary, we see what humanity is destined to become *if we say 'yes' to God.*

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For more reading on this topic check out Bishop Robert Barron series *The Mystery of God*

Guided Practice:

Here are some classic objections to God's existence. Take a moment and think of a possible response to each. As you go see if you can make reference to what Christians mean by God in your answer.

"If God exists then I cannot be free. But I am free. Therefore God cannot exist" – Jean Paul Satre

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that his will is not opposed to human freedom---God will is for me to be fully alive and free.

"Religion is the opium of the masses" in other words we invented religion to soothe our lives from all the difficulty and suffering. When we throw away the drug we will make progress.

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that...

"The idea of God is really just our own childish wishful thinking. We invented it because we wanted there to be a cosmic being that could fulfill our deepest longings for a perfect Father we could never have. We just need to wake up."

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that...

"Religion is like living in a permanent North Korea" in other words God is really just a cosmic cop who imposes his will on us.

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that...

"Existence precedes essence" in other words our freedom determines what we are entirely--- don't let someone outside of you tell you who to be, much less a religion"

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that...

"Why does God command us to worship him anyway? Is his ego so small that he needs little creatures to bow down in front of him so he can feel better than himself"

What this statement is not taking into account about God is that...

