

## 23T11 Is Atheism a Religion ?

Hello my friends. Thanks for joining me today for an @ the PUNLA coffee table. I'm Kip your host here at the PUNLA Coffee Table.

**Let's pray.**

### Introduction

As a scientist and engineer professionally, I am compelled to make a hypothesis, test and observe. This is often referred to as the scientific method. I actually disagree with the title; I believe this is God's method. Everything around us in the world seems to work this way, it's God's design. God however is not part of His design; He is the designer. So, when we start to ask questions about God like "does God exist", "why is there evil", "why am I here", we are ill equipped to find answers. All of us reject some answers and embrace others. Why? There are just some questions that lead us to the metaphysical or supernatural as the only plausible explanation. However, if your worldview presupposes there is no god, then what? This is the Atheist conundrum. When looking at the design from within the design, we have a personal stake in the observations. What we see and experience impacts our lives and the lives of those around us.

As a Christian I believe in God and truths which are contained in the Bible. The Bible provides a way of addressing those many questions, as a path to know the creator, God. As a philosopher, I can see how the principles shown in the Bible result in a better way to live. When these principles are applied the life of the practitioner and the lives of those around the practitioner are better. The scientist in me looks at the evidence for these principles. We can see how followers of Jesus serve others sacrificially. We can observe the revolutionary concept of selflessness, in the lives of many Christians before us. Most would say this revolutionary way of living is what makes Christianity a religion. What about the opposite position? Atheism is by purpose anti-theism. The atheist believes there is no God. The atheist believes there is no evidence for God. Based on this premise, atheists have built a system of beliefs that attempt to support that view. The atheists reason out what proper behavior should be and actively try to persuade others to adopt their views and reject all others.

For the purposes of this paper, I want to concentrate on two fundamental questions. What is religion?, and Is atheism a religion?

How do we define religion and what constitutes a religion or a religious system. Most would agree that most religions are either monotheistic or nonmonotheistic. What I mean is for a practitioner of a given religion, life centers around a deity or deities. The question we are forced to ask is a belief system which is centered around the rejection of a monotheistic god by definition a monotheistic religion?

## Defining Religion

In his book, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*<sup>1</sup>, Keith Yandell includes atheism as a monotheistic religion. Yandell theorizes that the anti of something is in itself part of that something or possibly a subset of that something. If Yandell is correct, then how do we define religion? What is a religion? Most in the western world would categorize a religion as rituals and culture around the belief in a deity. This is actually not a very good definition. This definition already presupposes Judea-Christian values. According to the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary<sup>2</sup> religion is defined as;

- a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices,
- the service and worship of God or the supernatural,
- commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance,
- a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith,
- archaic : scrupulous conformity : CONSCIENTIOUSNESS.

There are also many synonyms for religion in English including the words; credo, creed, cult, faith, persuasion. Any definition of religion is complex and multifaceted which is why so many philosophers' debate, argue and reflect on this very issue. I of course do not imagine to be able to provide any enlightening thought to this topic. The definitions of religion we just read from the dictionary, however, do not require any sort of devotion to a supernatural figure. Instead, for the purposes of this paper, a better working definition is a system of beliefs and/or practices or principles.

The first amendment to the US Constitution<sup>3</sup>, states, "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*" This is commonly referred to as freedom of religion but in recent years it has become more and more interpreted as freedom from religion.

In his article, "Is Atheism a Religion? Recent Judicial Perspectives on the Constitutional Meaning of Religion<sup>4</sup>," author Derek Davis describes how the definition of religion has been undergoing an evolution. He states that, "the essence of religion is belief in a relation to God" but what does that relationship entail. Can a rejection of God constitute a belief about the relation of God to one's life. Philosophically, saying my belief is that I have no relationship with a deity, is by its own definition a belief relationship about God.

Another common nuisance of a religion is evangelism. Most of us view this as a purely Christian term but that is actually not true. Every religion and every religious

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<sup>1</sup> Yandell, Keith, "*Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*," New York: Routledge (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion>. Accessed 1 May. 2023.

<sup>3</sup> (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I)

<sup>4</sup> Derek Davis, "*Is Atheism a Religion? Recent Judicial Perspectives on the Constitutional Meaning of 'Religion'*," *Journal of Church and State*, 47 no 4 (2005) 707-723.

practitioner work to promote and spread their views. The practitioner is zealously trying to influence others and convert them to their way of thinking. According to the Oxford dictionary<sup>5</sup> evangelism is defined as zealous advocacy of a cause. Obviously, there are other more Christian leaning definitions as well, but the word simply means “zealous advocacy of a cause.”

So, for lack of a better definition, a religion is a belief or system of understanding around which the practitioner centers their life. It is also generally accepted that in the practice of their religion, a practitioner of a religion will advocate for their religion as a better way. Therefore, a religion is composed of beliefs for which practitioners advocate.

### **Defining the Religion of Atheism**

Derek Davis<sup>6</sup> goes on to say in his article, *“The Court has so expanded the meaning of religion that, while never extending the definition to expressly include atheism, its motive in expanding the definition so broadly—to achieve equality among the panoply of worldviews that give meaning to life—nevertheless paved the way for atheism to be considered the equivalent of religion for First Amendment purposes.”* In the United States, at least, atheism is given equal protection under the law by the so-called freedom of religion statutes. You heard me correctly based on case law; the First Amendment has been considered to give atheism the equivalence of a religion.

In recent years we have seen the rise of a contemporary version of atheism, “the New Atheist” movement or TNAs. Richard Amesbury is a professor of Theological Ethics at University of Zurich. Amesbury<sup>7</sup> writes that, *“Championed by writers including Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, the so-called “new atheism” is now a ubiquitous feature of the Western religious landscape, particularly within the English-speaking world. But what makes the new atheism “new”.* In fact, there is nothing new about the “New Atheist” (TNAs) other than their condescending attack on especially Christian religion.

Thomas White<sup>8</sup> says, *“After their own fashion, TNAs ironically aid the emergence of a more pluralistic, capacious God centeredness out of the dogma of religious centeredness.”*

Professor Amesbury says, *“A characteristic feature of the so-called “new a theism” is that it opposes itself not simply to Christianity, or even to theism, but to any religion.”* Philosophers say to oppose something you would have to be something. Does atheism oppose religions as a competing system of thought or as a competing religious system?

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/> (Accessed 1 May. 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Derek Davis, *“Is Atheism a Religion? Recent Judicial Perspectives on the Constitutional Meaning of “Religion”*,” *Journal of Church and State*, 47 no 4 (2005) 707-723.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Amesbury, *“Atheism and the Invention of Religion: Notes on History and Anachronism,”* *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, 43 no 4 (Nov 2014) 40-45.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas White, *“PROFANE HOLINESS Why the New Atheism Is (Partially) Good for True Spirituality and Religion,”* *Cross Currents*, 59 no 4 (Dec 2009) 547-553.

Iben Damgaard wrote an article titled, “Through hermeneutics of suspicion to a rediscovery of faith Kierkegaard’s pamphlet “What Christ Judges of Official Christianity” in relation to Ricoeur’s “Religion, Atheism and Faith””<sup>9</sup>. In the paper, Damgaard discusses and cites several examples of how even atheists resolve to the use of religion to establish the norms and morals for society to operate under.

Gary Keogh continues this thought in his article, “Theism, Atheism, and Anti-Theism: A New Landscape for Theology.” Keogh says, “*The new atheists have presented strong critiques of religious belief by pointing out hypocrisy in moral issues and what they perceive as a self-declared exemption from moral criticism by religious traditions.*” Yet of course, atheist use the definitions of moral behavior that has been defined by religion, and in particular Christianity.

Another way of looking at this is from the spiritual perspective. Konrad Szocik and Philip Walden <sup>10</sup> wrote that “*Cognitive science of religion (CSR) suggests the naturalness of religion. Religious beliefs are viewed as natural because they are intuitive and cognitively effortless.*” Of course, this is what the atheist is saying, that they have a higher thought or even a higher system of thought. That higher system of thought results in a better life for the practitioner. Teemu Taira’s article, “Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?”,<sup>11</sup> discusses how in recent years so many books have been published by the “New Atheist” which can only be categorized as spiritual. Books about atheist spirituality, atheist self-help books and on and on. The modern atheist is combining spirituality in a way that some are calling “post-secular.” Taira says, “*the uses of spirituality in atheist writings are examples of blurring the discursive boundaries of what is typically classified as religious and as secular (non-religious).*”

Another evidence that atheism is a religion is how the New Atheists also want to assume the “intrinsic evidence” of the laws of logic and science. Ian Macleod<sup>12</sup> quotes that atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell recognized this problem of induction: “*The general principles of science, such as the belief in the reign of law, and the belief that every event must have a cause, are as completely dependent upon the inductive principle as are the beliefs of daily life. All such general principles are believed because mankind have found innumerable instances of their truth and no instances of their falsehood.*”

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<sup>9</sup> Iben Damgaard. “Through hermeneutics of suspicion to a rediscovery of faith Kierkegaard’s pamphlet “What Christ Judges of Official Christianity” in relation to Ricoeur’s “Religion, Atheism and Faith,”” *Studia theologica*, 72 no 2 (2018) 198-216.

<sup>10</sup> Konrad Szocik; Philip L.Walden, “Why Atheism Is More Natural Than Religion,” *Studia Religiosa*, 48 no 4 (2015) 313-326.

<sup>11</sup> Teemu Taira, “Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 24 (2012) 388-404.

<sup>12</sup> Ian C. Macleod, “The New Atheism: An Historical Development and Critique,” *Puritan Reformed Journal*, 7 no 1 (Jan 2015) 228-242.

Gavin Hyman<sup>13</sup> wrote an article titled, “Dialectics or politics? Atheism and the return to religion.” In his article Hyman describes how there are actually different forms of atheism. The existence of the different forms of atheism is explained by the fact they are responding to or trying to negate various forms of theism. Hyman goes on to say, *“atheism that are antagonistic towards religion, seeing it as something to be overcome, and those forms that in some sense have been returning to religion while remaining resolutely atheistic.”* This fervent belief that their system is better or right, looks like an effort to make converts or what we would call evangelism. If the “New Atheist” are in fact evangelist for atheism, then it follows that they are practicing in effect a religion of atheism.

This next quote puzzled me. Mary Ellen Konieczny and Megan C. Rogers<sup>14</sup> wrote an article titled, “Religion, Secular Humanism, and Atheism: Multi-Institutional Politics and the USAFA Cadets’ Freethinkers Group”. In this article Konieczny and Rogers said, *“Secularist movements, which contain a spectrum of nonbelieving identities ranging from atheism to secular humanism, have asserted themselves against this deprivatization of religion in varied ways that emphasize their different goals and identities.”*

### Conclusion

Mary Ellen Konieczny and Megan C. Rogers in their article “Religion, Secular Humanism, and Atheism: Multi-Institutional Politics and the USAFA Cadets’ Freethinkers Group,” stated *“Secularist movements, which contain a spectrum of nonbelieving identities ranging from atheism to secular humanism, have asserted themselves against this deprivatization of religion in varied ways that emphasize their different goals and identities”* This article was in many ways sympathetic to these concepts of secular humanism, atheism and post-secularism which are in fact different variation on atheism. All of these flavors of atheism are comprised thoughts which are intentionally trying to compete with the traditional religions and religious thought.

In his article “Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide,” Anthony Carroll<sup>15</sup> describes an interesting phenomena. *“The Inter Faith Network joined forces with the British Humanist Association to promote a dialogue on the substance of each other’s beliefs. Under the wise leadership of Brian Pearce, its adviser on faith and public life, the Network had acquired a reputation for the promotion of mutual understanding and bridge-building in interfaith relationships – and now sought to do the same for dialogue between those of all faiths and none.”* This sounds a lot like inter-faith activities between protestant denominations or even events when multi-religions come together, i.e., Christian, Roman Catholic, Judaism, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, etc. If these types of groups and events are beginning to include humanist or atheist groups as well, is this not evidence that atheism is in itself a form of religious thought?

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<sup>13</sup> Gavin Hyman, “Dialectics or politics? Atheism and the return to religion,” *Approaching Religion*, 2 no 1 (2012) 66-74.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Ellen Konieczny; Megan C. Rogers, “Religion, Secular Humanism, and Atheism: Multi-Institutional Politics and the USAFA Cadets’ Freethinkers Group,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 55 no 4 (Dec 2016) 821-838.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony J. Carroll, “Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide,” *Modern Believing*, 62 no1 (2021) 90-92.

Teemu Taira<sup>16</sup> writes that after examining many popular atheist books, it was clear how much spirituality and meditation was an essential part of atheism to many of the practitioners. This spirituality and meditation were not original thoughts, rather they have been borrowed from other religions. Modern atheist, including the “New Atheist,” mix eastern religious thought and practices with Judeo-Christian moral values to form their belief system. The many subgroups with variation of these looks very much like our protestant denominations. A single religion with many flavors.

Therefore, religion is a belief or understanding around which the practitioner centers their life. Commonly in Christianity the practitioner centers their life around a relationship with God. The Christian religion and its practitioners want to share their belief system with others. Christians evangelize in an effort to convert others to their religious system of thought. Practitioners of Christianity are saddened or even angered when a fellow practitioner changes their religious thoughts and converts to another religion. In Buddhism, the practitioner centers their life centered around enlightenment. Buddhism is a religion. The Buddhist religion and its practitioners want to share their belief system with others. Buddhists want to share their thoughts in an effort to convert others to their religious system of thought. We would define this as evangelism. Practitioners of Buddhism are saddened or even angered when a fellow practitioner changes their religious thoughts and converts to another religion. Hinduism in its various forms, I think we would all agree is a religion or maybe even religions. The Hindu practitioner centers their life around the practice of their beliefs. The practitioner of a given Hindu sect wants to share their thoughts in an effort to convert others to their religious system of thought. We would define this as evangelism. Practitioners of Hinduism are saddened or even angered when a fellow practitioner changes their religious thoughts and converts to another religion.

Now what about the atheist. The practitioner of atheism lives a life centered around the principle that denies the existence of God. The atheist wants to share their thoughts in an effort to convert others to their religious system of thought. We would define this as evangelism. Practitioners of atheism are saddened or even angered when a fellow practitioner changes their religious thoughts and converts to another religion.

What is the difference between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and atheism and other religions? The difference is the components of the religious thought system, but they are all defined by religious thought, practices, and beliefs. Religions seem to have several aspects in common, 1) practitioners with zeal for their beliefs, i.e., religious thoughts, 2) practitioners who want to convert others, i.e., evangelism, 3) a system of thought associated with deity or god(s), i.e., religion.

Atheists hold too strong convictions about thoughts. These thoughts become religious in nature when the practitioner begins to evangelize others in an effort to gain more members or converts. Remember our definition of religion as a belief or system of understanding around which the practitioner centers their life. Atheism is without a

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<sup>16</sup> Teemu Taira, “*Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?*,” Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 24 (2012) 388-404.

doubt a system of understanding around which atheists center their life and thought. Remember our definition of evangelism as zealous advocacy of a cause. Atheist and especially the “New Atheist” are zealously advocating for their cause. They advocate for their thought as the only reasonable thought. They advocate for everyone to convert to their form of religious thoughts.

What about the fundamental questions of, “does God exist”, “why is there evil”, “why am I here”. Christianity has an answer for these questions but so does atheism. Does God Exist? The Christian would say yes, from the evidence around us and the Bible yes. A design must have a designer. The atheist on the other hand would say no. The atheist would list many reasons why God is improbable if not impossible. Why is there evil? The Christian would use philosophy and reason, along with truths from the Bible to explain “why evil is.” The atheist on the other hand will try to use evil to disprove God. The atheist will use their reason and philosophy to show religions don’t work. Although the atheist has no explanation for evil or even a way to define evil, atheism still tries to provide an answer to the question. Why am I here? The Christian says we have purpose and importance. The atheist on the other hand has no choice but to say we have no purpose. There is no reason to be here and no purpose in existence at all. Both the atheist and the Christian have a belief structure or religion to help them answer these fundamental questions. In fact, all religions have belief structures to address these questions, which is why they are called religions.

Atheism is recognized legally in the United States as being equal with/to religion. Atheism has a system of beliefs, and many sub-flavors of those beliefs which practitioner group themselves into just like denominations or sects. Atheists zealously advocate for their system of thought above all others which is evangelism. After all of this discussion, what is the definition of atheism? According to the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary<sup>17</sup> atheism is defined as a philosophical or religious position characterized by disbelief in the existence of a god or any gods. Enough said, atheism is a religious position, or in simpler terms atheism is a religion.

### **Let’s Pray.**

Thank you for joining me today @ the PUNLA CoffeeTable. If you liked the message, please share a link with a friend. You can contact me at [kip@punla.org](mailto:kip@punla.org) if you have comments or questions. So, until next time @ the PUNLA CoffeeTable. God bless.

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<sup>17</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atheism> (Accessed 1 May. 2023)