

23T12 are all Worldviews Religions?

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 this name; 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. There is no doubt, that all of the world's major religions attempt to answer these questions, but what about those that appear to be anti-religion like atheism or nihilism or postmodernism, etc. All of these would be considered worldviews but are they religions by definition and practice. For the purposes of this paper, we will try to argue that these anti-religions, atheism, nihilism and postmodernism, are in fact religions in themselves. Now please understand before we begin, I am not advocating that all variations on worldviews are religion, only that worldviews which try to answer the three fundamental questions discussed above by definition must be considered religion.

Defining 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 Dictionary¹ 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.

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

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 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 dictionary² 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 of living. Therefore, a religion is composed of beliefs for which practitioners advocate.

Atheism Religion?

Atheism is by purpose anti-theism. The atheist believes there is no God. They believe 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. In his book, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*³, 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. The first amendment to the US Constitution⁴, 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*”⁵, author Derek Davis describes how the definition of religion has been undergoing an evolution. Philosophically, saying my belief is that I have no relationship with a deity, is by its own definition a belief relationship about God. Derek Davis⁶ 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 as an equivalence of a religion.

² Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/> (Accessed 1 May. 2023).

³ Yandell, Keith, “*Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*,” New York: Routledge (2002).

⁴ (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I)

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

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. Amesbury⁷ 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 White⁸ 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?

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*”⁹. 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 Keogh¹⁰ 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, the atheist uses 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 Walden¹¹ 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Gary Keogh, “*Theism, Atheism, and Anti-Theism: A New Landscape for Theology,*” New Theology Review, 27 no 2 (2015) 97-99.

¹¹ Konrad Szocik; Philip L.Walden, “*Why Atheism Is More Natural Than Religion,*” Studia Religiologica, 48 no 4 (2015) 313-326.

thought results in a better life for the practitioner. Teemu Taira's article, "Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?",¹² 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 Macleod¹³ 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 has found innumerable instances of their truth and no instances of their falsehood."*

Gavin Hyman¹⁴ 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.

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.

¹² Teemu Taira, "Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?," Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 24 (2012) 388-404.

¹³ Ian C. Macleod, "The New Atheism: An Historical Development and Critique," Puritan Reformed Journal, 7 no 1 (Jan 2015) 228-242.

¹⁴ Gavin Hyman, "Dialectics or politics? Atheism and the return to religion," Approaching Religion, 2 no 1 (2012) 66-74.

Teemu Taira¹⁵ 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 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.

Atheist clearly answer the question “does God exist?” with a NO. Atheists answer the “why is there evil?” question with there is no truth. Atheists answer the question of “why am I here?” with a simple no reason, no meaning. Regardless of whether the atheist truly live these out in their lives is debatable. What is not debatable is that atheism has at its core a system of beliefs which try to answer these fundamental questions and the atheist practitioner advocates for their system of belief. That is religion by definition.

Nihilism Religion?

Nihilism is more difficult to define as a religion. Sometimes referred to as existentialism, nihilism accepts most the naturalist atheist propositions, but nihilism goes further to consider that humans are not significant in an otherwise insignificant world.¹⁶ Anne Sauka¹⁷ writes that nihilism condemns the flesh and materialism. She says, “exiled materiality as fictitious and illusory, nihilism does the same with the ‘soul’” by

¹⁵ Teemu Taira, “*Atheist spirituality A follow on from New Atheism?*,” Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 24 (2012) 388-404.

¹⁶ James W. Sire, “*The Universe Next Door*,” Inter-Varsity Press: England (2004) 5th ed.

¹⁷ Anne Sauka. “*A lack of meaning? Reactive nihilism and processual materiality*,” Approaching Religion, 10 no 2 (Nov 2020) 125-140.

eliminating all meaning. Author Joel Okamoto¹⁸ wrote an article titled, “*When Salt Loses Its Saltiness Nihilism and the Contemporary Church*.” In this article Okamoto describes how individualism, secularism and pluralism has giving rise to nihilism. He writes that nihilism devaluates themselves. Algis Valiunas¹⁹ describes nihilism as the “purest distillation of nothingness.” The commitment of nihilists is to themselves only.

The question becomes does the nihilism system of belief try to answer the fundamental questions we have posed. Nihilism clearly answers the question “does God exist?” with a NO just as emphatically as the atheist. A true nihilist answers the “why is there evil?” question with there is no truth, only nothingness. Nihilist answers the question of “why am I here?” with a simple no reason, no meaning, it is only about them. Regardless of whether the nihilist can truly live these principles honestly out in their lives is debatable. What is not debatable is that nihilism, like atheism, has at its core a system of beliefs which try to answer these fundamental questions and the nihilist practitioner advocates for their system of belief. Now we may debate if a non-answer qualifies as an attempt to answer, but regardless nihilism does give an answer. That is religion by definition.

Postmodernism Religion?

Postmodernism is even more difficult to define as a religion. Postmodernism moves away from addressing what is there or how we know, but instead focuses on how language functions to construct meaning.²⁰ There are many confusing variations proposed in the literature. Jens Zimmermann²¹ reflects that postmodernism, in its essence, is a concept of human self-questioning. The question becomes does the general postmodernism system of ideas try to answer the fundamental questions we have posed. Postmodernism does not clearly answer the question “does God exist?” While the atheist and nihilist emphatically say, no, there are forms of postmodernism which do view this as a question to answer. Charles May describes how “*Postmodernism at times is anti-philosophy*.”²² A true postmodernist does not try to answer the questions of “why is there evil?” or “why am I here?” Instead, the postmodernism is focused on how and why we tell our stories and how we use language to do so. Obviously there are many variations on postmodernism but regardless at its core is a system of beliefs which try to at least address these fundamental questions. The postmodern practitioner advocates for their system of belief. Now we may debate if a non-answer qualifies as an attempt to answer, but regardless postmodernism does give a qualified answer.

Conclusion

At their core, atheism, nihilism, and postmodernism are all anti-theism worldviews. Fundamentally, what is the difference between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism,

¹⁸ Joel P. Okamoto, “*When Salt Loses Its Saltiness Nihilism and the Contemporary Church*,” *Concordia Journal*, 44 no 4 (Fall 2018) 33-49.

¹⁹ Algis Valiunas, “*Nihilism for The Ironhearted*,” *First Things*, 322 (Apr 2022) 27-33.

²⁰ James W. Sire, “*The Universe Next Door*,” Inter-Varsity Press: England (2004) 5th ed.

²¹ Jens Zimmermann, “*Quo Vadisi: Literary Theory beyond Postmodernism*,” *Christianity and Literature*, 53 no 4 Sum (2004) 495-519.

²² Charles E. May, “*What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*,” *Christianity and Literature*, 40 no 4 (Sum 1991) 394-396.

Hinduism and these anti-theism worldviews like atheism, nihilism, and postmodernism? All of these worldviews have defined a specific system of thought, practices, and beliefs. Religions seem to have several aspects in common with the anti-theism worldviews, 1) each have practitioners with zeal for their beliefs, i.e., religious thoughts, 2) each have practitioners who some way want to convert others to their system of thought, i.e., evangelism, 3) each worldview system of thought has some sort of thought on deity or god(s), i.e., religion. But does this make each of these worldviews a religion, I say no.

At the very least both atheism and existential nihilism have a well-defined view of God. The practitioners' live lives centered around the principle that denies the existence of God. The true postmodernist is not interested in even addressing this question. The atheist wants to share their thoughts in an effort to convert others to their religious system of thought, but the true nihilist or postmodernist would not care about how you view their belief and care nothing about your belief. However, it should be mentioned that few practitioners nihilism or postmodernism live this worldview out consistently. Typically, both nihilism and postmodernism devolve into a form of atheism and actively advocate for their belief system.

In general, each of these worldviews at least attempted to address the fundamental questions, even if they avoided answering the questions directly. It is my opinion that each of these anti-theist worldviews exhibits a system of thought and beliefs that should be defined as a religious system of belief. The question remains do these anti-theist worldviews provide answers to our fundamental questions of "does God exist?", "why is there evil?", and "why am I here?" I say no. It is true that both atheism and nihilism state clearly God does not exist and is not necessary. True postmodernism fails to even address this question as not relevant. Neither of these anti-theist worldviews make any real attempt to answer the questions about evil and our existence. Their primary premise is these are pointless questions and as such they are the wrong question which they do not need to address. Unfortunately, these are the fundamental questions most human beings contemplate, whether or not the practitioners of these worldviews see them as relevant. In order to be considered a religion, I believe that a worldview must address the fundamental questions of humans. This is practically why these alternative worldviews are so difficult for practitioners to live out honestly and consistently in their lives. Therefore, no, these anti-theist worldviews are not religions even though they exhibit high levels of religious thought.

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 if you have comments or questions. So, until next time @ the PUNLA CoffeeTable. God bless.