

God and Atheism: Recent Reverberations

***God “in the news”:** the recent books advocating atheism.

***Two Big Questions about God:** (1) *What is the “referent” of the word? To what are we referring when we use the word “God”?* (2) *What is God like and what does God care about - what is God’s character and passion, God’s nature and will?*

Part One: Two Different Referents of the word “God.”

1. I grew up with what is called “supernatural theism.” The word “God” refers to “a being” separate from the universe. A “super being,” all powerful and all knowing. A “person-like” being who wills and acts and loves and judges. An authority figure - a law-giver and judge. And a being who loves us. An interventionist God who relates to the world through interventions – in the Bible and also today. God is *a being* “out there,” and we are “here,” but God is not, except in extraordinary moments.

2. God as “the encompassing Reality,” “the encompassing Spirit,” who pervades all that is. God is “the One in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28)

*Psalm 139: “Where shall I flee from your Spirit?” Wherever we go, God is there...

*We are in God as fish are in water..

*God includes all that is and is “more” than all that is

*Irenaeus (2nd century): God contains everything and is contained by nothing

*Julian of Norwich (14th century): we are not simply made by God, but made of God

*Grounded in mystical experience as well as intellectual reflection.

*Mystical experience: mystics “behold” the sacred....

*God is everywhere – “omnipresent”

*The universe is filled with the presence of God

*In shorthand, this is the God of “**panentheism.**” A modern word, but an ancient understanding: “everything is in God.”

*This is orthodox Christianity. It affirms both the *transcendence* (the “moreness”) and *immanence* (the “presentness”) of God.

These differences between two ways of thinking about the referent of “God” matter.

*The first makes God difficult to believe in.

*“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” The contemporary best-sellers on atheism are negations of the first way.

*The second gets rid of the intellectual difficulties of the first. It also changes the question of “the existence of God.” The question is not whether there is another being whom we might call God, but what we are going to call “this.” Is “this” nothing special? Cosmic soup? Stardust? Or wondrous, and evoking gratitude and praise?

*Thomas Keating: God is “isness without limits.”

*“**Isness**” is: what are we going to call “isness”?

*The second does *not* affirm divine intervention, but *intention, interaction, and presence.*

*The *language* of supernatural theism is **the language of personification: we speak of God as if God were a person.** This is the natural language of prayer, worship and devotion. Nothing wrong with personification as long as it is not taken literally. When

it is literalized, problems arise: can make God remote and distant; problems with the notion of intervention; God's reality becomes questionable."

Part Two. Thinking about God's Character and Passion According to the Bible, God not only "is" but has **character** and **passion** (sometimes called the *nature* and *will* of God). **Character:** as when we think of a person's character, what are they like at a deep level? What is God like? **Passion:** as when we ask of a person, "What is your passion in life?" What is God passionate about? **Two options within the Bible and Christianity.**

These two ways of seeing God's character and passion are both present in the Bible and in post-biblical Christianity. They are very different, so different that they virtually produce two different kinds of Christianity.

1. God as Judging/Punitive/Violent. God is a righteous judge who punishes those who don't "get it right" – whatever combination of belief and behavior that involves
 *The God I grew up with, and the God of "common Christianity" for a long time
 *I learned that God loves us, Jesus loves us – but also there would be a final reckoning
 *And whenever "judgment" is emphasized, God is the punitive God, no matter how much the language of love and forgiveness is used.

*This is the God of much of "common Christianity" with its emphasis on an afterlife in heaven or hell. Only some will be saved. Some – perhaps most – will be punished because they didn't believe the right things and/or live the right way.

*This is also the violent God....

*Leads to "fear-based" Christianity. Fear-based religion and a fear-based orientation toward life – including fear-based politics – commonly go together

*Question: do you think God ever punishes anybody? An example? (And do not confuse "punishment" with natural consequences)

2. God as Gracious/Compassionate/Loving/Womb-Like. God is life-giving, nourishing, loving, and wills our well-being. God loves the whole of creation – for God so loves the world. God yearns that we see that – for if we do, our lives will change. It produces a Christianity free from fear, anxiety and preoccupation with ourselves, and thus frees us to be grateful, present, compassionate, life-giving, courageous.

So also: *what is the passion of your God?* What is your God passionate about?

*For Christians, the answer to the question is found in the Bible and Jesus, our two primary sources of revelation. Of these two, Jesus is the most important – this is what it means to say that he is "the Word of God" become flesh.

*According to the Bible and Jesus, God's passion is transformation – *the transformation of ourselves and the transformation of the world.*

The "kingdom of God" – a world of justice (distributive justice) and peace as "the dream of God" – God's dream for the earth.

In short: it matters how we see God.