

ADENA PHILIPS

The False Binary of Theism vs. Atheism

*Why ‘Do you believe in God?’
is the wrong question*



AS A YOUNG philosophy student flirting with the boundaries of my Orthodox upbringing, I was often asked whether I “still” believed in God. One day, I found myself warily defending my evolving beliefs in response to a strident interrogation from a family member. “Are you asking me if I believe there is a Man in the sky, who concerns Himself with what we eat and what we wear, and has a book of good and evil that he tallies once a year to determine who will die by fire or water, or wild beast or strangulation?”

My exasperated response was less a criticism of the God of my family’s Shabbat table and the melodic High Holiday prayers—whom I often experienced as the majestic Father, Shepherd, Creator, and King—and more a reaction to what felt like a diminishment of my enchanting and expanding sense of the Divine. Asking me whether I believed in God felt reductive. The textureless oversimplification of

a yea-or-nay question landed as a blunt dismissal of my theological, even existential, journey, of the thoughts that kept me up at night and that were steering my early-adult life choices. What I so deeply craved to be asked was “What *do* you believe in?” or “What do you think is going on here?”



At least as far back as the ancient Greeks, societies have categorized thinkers into the binary buckets of theists and atheists. Theists pass the test with a simple “yes” —backed up by often ineffable internal forces that run the gamut from ecstatic conviction to the probabilistic pragmatism or spiritual laziness of Pascal’s wager. Atheists and their inner abstractions were, for many centuries, banished or shamed, their writings removed from libraries. The pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras spent his late years in exile for rejecting classic Greek conceptions of God. Despite this, he became an essential contributor to modern views of a purpose-driven order in the world and what would later be contained in the teleological argument for the existence of God.

This binary construct of theist vs. atheist, the classification that is all too often relied on to help communities of faith delineate “who is with us and who is not; who is in and who is out,” grants little space to the intricacies inherent in the universal human quest to grasp at the transcendent, or to cling to a God figure (what the Jewish mystics call *devekut*).

How many people, for thousands of years and still today, buy into this binary when taking their very last precious breaths? “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? You still have time. Even as you approach the gates of death, it’s not too late; all you have to do is say ‘I do!’”

Not to suggest this is a purely Christian phenomenon. The Jewish tradition, too, clings to this false binary even while its vocabulary subverts it. Biblical Hebrew espouses myriad conceptions of God, beginning with the character's first appearance in the Torah as Elohim (curiously, "Gods," a plural form that takes a singular verb). The name itself is an expression of God's plural nature, or plural-ism, perhaps reflected in Walt Whitman's description of self: "I contain multitudes." Elohim has an internal dialogue, or one with a council of angels, and bears at least some conception of a likeness of self; "Let us make man in our image and likeness!"

In contrast, fast-forward a few biblical chapters, and the God that Moses encounters introduces himself as an eternal transience, "I will be that I will be," asserting that his name forever shall be YHVH — a word that is an amalgamation of "was, is, and will be" (and is, by design, unpronounceable, literally undefinable).

Our sages and mystics refer to God at times as *Ha-makom* (the place) and at others as the apparent opposite, *Ein Sof* (without end, infinity, or, in Kabbalah, the void). And then of course there is *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine "presence" or "dwelling." Which is it then? The omnipresent place, the infinite void, or the dwelling presence? Our sages consider each name to highlight a different attribute or character trait of the Creator. (Incidentally, the multiplicity of names for God in the Jewish tradition has analogs in other traditions, such as Islam's 99 names for God that appear in the Koran, the various Hindu expressions of Brahman, a single divine power, and Christianity's holy trinity.)

What do each of these names for the Divine imply about what the Divine might be, the nature of our existence, and what is being asked of us? One could argue that the Elohim of the creation story teaches us not only that we are all created in the image of God, but that our purpose is to behave as expressions of the Divine. Or that Moses's

YHVH portends a divinity in the sum total of all that is and that will ever be, in the oneness of all existence. Perhaps YHVH nudges us to recognize the distinction between the human and the Divine as illusory in the first place—and instead to embrace a non-dual reality that is infused everywhere, including our selves—in body and thought—with Divine energy. Aren't then all constructs of God in essence conceptions of the why and the what of existence, reflections of the manifold ways in which people experience and interact with the transcendent?



Do you believe in God? Which one? Divergent conceptions, like the ones above, entreat us to probe more deeply into the nature of existence and our purpose here. Our tradition bestows on us this richness, and—much to our spiritual detriment—we bypass it by oversimplifying our conversations about God.

The Pew Research Center's U.S. Religious Landscape Surveys in 2007 and 2014 revealed a downward trend in respondents indicating a belief in God or a universal being. In 2017, Pew took the commendable step of expanding this inquiry, following the question "Do you believe in God, or not?" with questions about what respondents believe this God to be like, and how they interact with said God. Roughly half of the respondents who answered "no" to believing in God still indicated belief in some higher power or spiritual force, and 30 percent of those who answered "yes" to believing in God indicated that they do not believe in the Bible. These data reinforce the challenge to the believer/nonbeliever, theist/atheist paradigm. Jews were much less likely to believe in the traditional God of the Bible than were Christians, and more likely to believe in a higher power. One might read this evidence of the secularity of

American Jewish respondents, but isn't it possible that their belief in a higher power has an expression in Judaism we have not yet fully recognized?

What the binary does is belittle God and the majesty of existence. As the writer Michael Kingsley said of the notorious atheist Christopher Hitchens, "Unlike others, he treats God like an adult."

So instead of asking each other "Do you believe in God?" what should we be asking?

How about: Are you concerned with the nature of existence? Are you curious about it? Do you wonder what we're doing here? What are the instances that pique your cosmic curiosity, where does your mind go when that happens, and what is the texture of that experience for you? *What do you believe in?*

I suggest that this litmus test serves as a more effective classification system than the binary we've inherited. The categorization of "those who are concerned with the nature of existence" versus "those who don't think about it, aren't interested, and don't care" is far more useful in guiding us to meaningful conversation, and in making sure that the conversation includes the full range of insights it can expose. Consider, based on the Pew study, that an atheist may have more in common with a believer who ascribes to a universal consciousness than to an absurdist, and that same believer may have more in common with an atheist than with a Pascal's wagerer.

The "abominable heresies" for which Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated from his Jewish community arguably dovetail harmoniously with those who connect with the Divine through nature or earth-based Judaism. Does his once controversial phrase *Deus, sive Natura* (God, or Nature) offend one's spiritual senses, or can it deepen the shuckling of a pious Jew reciting a benediction over a flash of lighting, or a rainbow?

People love to debate whether Einstein was an atheist, but doesn't

the fact that he called the mysterious “the source of all true art and science” render moot the meaningfulness of that debate?

If you believe in God, or a universal power, what are either or both of them like, and how do you interact with them? What does your theory, whatever it is, indicate about how you are called to conduct your life, weigh your decisions, treat others, and establish societal norms? What do you think we’re doing here? In effect, what’s going on, and why does it matter?

Opening the aperture of this conversation with our peers, our students, our children, and our communities can unlock the depth of spirituality that the believer/unbeliever or theist/atheist taxonomy has stymied. It shifts the “Are you in or are you out” dynamic by including in the conversation all seekers, the curious who feel that this question matters. It includes the valuable perspectives and community members who would otherwise be left out.

Religious experience — as modeled by our biblical ancestors — is animated by feelings of loving, fearing, challenging, and doubting God, sometimes in quick succession or simultaneously. A person of faith may be, during some periods, deeply connected to this line of spiritual inquiry and, at other times, more distanced from it. Engaging “seekers” rather than “believers” allows for a sincere grappling with faith that may not be a constant and consistent position. An earnest seeker’s connection to the Divine would naturally oscillate through circumstance. A member of my community, when asked recently whether she believes in God, responded “most of the time.” What would the permission to answer this question in a nonbinary way do for us? Allowing for a broader spectrum honors the diversity of spiritual journeys that shape our collective tapestry of beliefs.

I believe that the paradigm I’m suggesting more accurately honors the ethos of our people, who bear the name *Israel*—literally, “God Wrestler.” It enables more intimacy and connection among

people with diverse viewpoints and experiences in our shared spiritual spaces, and it creates the conditions for a more authentic relationship with the Divine. Asking these questions allows us to tease out the richness of the Jewish spiritual tradition and find points of intersection with, and distinction from, other faiths. Most important, these conversations create a bridge between our spiritual beliefs, sometimes privately held, and our behavioral and moral choices, and the norms and policies we establish in our communities. It makes it harder to ignore that these choices should be driven by our deepest connection to purpose, to whatever we think underlies the mysteries that shape our lives, and to the most profound questions that stir our souls.



Today when asked whether I believe in God, I no longer feel confined to a singular doctrinal response. Not without a little sympathy for my interlocutor who may not be ready for these musings, I'll expound upon my non-dual experience of the Divine (for me, reinforced in the declaration that God is "One" in my recitation of the *shema*) and the myriad places I experience transcendence, from nature's intricate designs to the kindness of a stranger. The God of my Jewish upbringing lives for me in the warmth of a Shabbat table, the liturgical depth of our prayers and their accompanying melodies, and in the mystical underpinnings of the Jewish annual cycle. She also appears in the ecstasy of the dance floor, the belly laughs between friends, the eruption of a volcano, and in sacred tears on a dark night of the soul. Sometimes the Divine is a pronounced voice shouting to me, other times a faint whisper I have to quiet my mind to hear, and at times a complete absence.

As my conception of God has evolved throughout my journey with

Jewish spirituality, I've come to see it as a mirror—a projection of my own inner state, constellation of beliefs, and learning at a given point in time. What does your conception of God, or your community's, signal about your beliefs, your current state of being, and how you are choosing to live? As we are created in God's image, perhaps so is God in ours. *