

VIEWS OF DEITY

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God/god refers to ultimate reality. Christianity views God as eternal, ethical interpersonality with certain other knowable attributes. In contrast, the ancient nations around Israel as well as peoples living in modern times have concepts of deity that are incompatible with the biblical understanding.

- A. Theism. A general term for belief in God, usually considered transcendent and personal.
- B. Atheism. The disbelief in the existence of any deity. All reality has one level, non-theistic. God is not a direction-setting aspect within the universe (panentheism, theistic naturalism), nor is he transcendent to the universe.
- C. Agnosticism. Unbelief in the existence of any deity means that neither the nature nor existence of deity is known or knowable. A person makes no claim as to whether deity exists or not. Agnosticism is practical atheism; if people not sure there is any God, they will not be involving God in their choices or actions, nor will they serve and worship him.
- D. Pantheism. All is god, and god is all; God is the universe. There is no supreme God distinguishable from, or transcendent to, the rest of reality. Pantheism amounts to atheism in that only one level of reality exists.
- E. Panentheism [theistic naturalism]. God is an aspect of the universe; he is part of the natural order. God does not transcend the rest of reality. He is “immanent” (near) both in distance and kind. He may be regarded as the “vital urge” expressing itself in evolutionary sequence, the principle of order with material reality, or the striving for ideal achievement. Eastern religions generally as well as New Age beliefs are examples of panentheistic thinking.
Sometimes theologians use *panentheism* in a formal way to picture God as being locationally inside the universe without necessarily meaning God is part of that order of things.
- F. God of the Gaps. God is a symbol that represents the unknown fact that fills in the holes in knowledge. As knowledge increases, of course, God becomes less, a reducing ideal entity. “God of the gaps” becomes a label for the as-yet unknown, perhaps unknowable.
- G. Deism. A particular form of theism. God created the universe with built-in laws for its continued operation. Supernatural intervention does not occur thereafter. So, miracles and special divine providence do not happen in response to prayer or otherwise, because God does not intervene visibly or invisibly to bring such things about. The natural and relational characteristics of God remain as they are presented in Judaeo-Christian heritage: he is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, transcendent, holy, living, etc.; but God does not relate to his people through intervention. Loving is compromised as a relational characteristic.

H. Monolatry. Belief in the existence of many gods but the worship of one. The gods may be thought of as territorial or associated with various parts of reality.

I. Henotheism. A pantheon of gods whose supreme God may vary or rotate from time to time. One god is supreme and then another. The signs of the zodiac may be thought of as exemplifying henotheism. (In recent usage, *henotheism* has been used for monolatry, the belief in many gods but the worship of only one.)

J. Monotheism. The belief that there is one transcendent, personal God. Monotheism contrasts with polytheism, the belief in many gods. It includes monarchianism (next) and Christian trinitarianism.

K. Monarchianism (unitarianism). God is not only one but single; he is one person in contrast to a trinity of persons. Monarchianism has been of two general types:

1. Dynamic monarchianism (adoptionism). Jesus was human, a man only, not God-man, who was either virgin born or the physical son of Joseph. The Spirit descended on him at his baptism, when God adopted him as his special son. The doctrine was held by the Ebionites, a Jewish sect of the second and third centuries.

2. Modalistic monarchianism (Docetism, Patripassianism, Sebellianism, economic trinity, manifestative trinity). Christ was divine and indistinguishable from the Father. Father, Son, and Spirit are three different manifestations of the same one person, an “economic trinity” rather than a real numerical one. Under this heading also belongs the idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three roles for the same individual one. Wife, daughter, and mother are three relational roles the same person has.

In the docetic adaptation, Christ’s body was a phantom in that it had the appearance of flesh, but its real substance was celestial. He only “seemed” (δοκέω) to have material existence. Incarnation and resurrection did not take place because matter is evil and spirit is good; so God as good spirit would not have mingled himself with flesh as evil matter. Even if he had incarnated, he would not have resurrected back into evil material existence; so resurrection would not have been desirable.

Patripassianism was the name in the Western church for what in the Eastern Church was known as Sabellianism, named after Sabellius, a prominent spokesman for that doctrine. The term *patripassianism* means “father suffers” (*pater* + *passio*).

Unitarianism conceives of God as one individual with Christ, perhaps, as functional deity, that is, as a man called God because he fulfilled the role of deity on earth. He was like Israel’s judges in Psalm 82:6 that God called “gods,” an example Jesus himself raises when accused of blasphemy (John 10:34). In this view, he was an extension of deity like the ten or so men beyond the Twelve who were called “apostles” because they served as extensions of the apostolic office and labored at the apostles’ behest.

A related concept supposes that before times eternal, God was one individual, one unit; and the Son and the Holy Spirit separated off “temporarily” for operational purposes during history. In the end, Son (and Spirit) will “absorb” back into one unit (1 Corinthians 15:28, “*God may be all in all*”). The idea takes a temporary functional threeness during history and conceives of it as a temporary substantive threeness during time. Before and after, however, God is one individual.

In the modern setting, the trinity issue comes up in connection with Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the United Pentecostal Church.

L. Trinitarianism. The belief that God/deity is three-in-one. In practical usage, it covers various attempts in Christendom to verbalize how the three are one at the same time. The "orthodox" view has been that Father, Son, and Spirit are one in three persons (cp. "*Holy, Holy, Holy*," e.g.). They are three persons with the same nature and purpose. They form a complementary set. (See the essay on "The Divine Trinity.")

M. Binitarianism. God the Father and the Son comprise deity. The Holy Spirit is a word for God's presence, energy, and assistance.

N. Tritheism. The idea that there are three separate Gods that do not form a complementary unity of purpose and operation.

O. Dialecticism. A view of God found in neo-orthodoxy in which God is said to be wholly other although he is also wholly for us. Since God is completely different from us, there can be no such thing as word revelation from him, nor can people be said meaningfully to be created in the image of God.

P. Polytheism. The belief in and worship of many gods. Polytheism can involve worship of natural forces and heavenly bodies as well as the worship of idols and images. There is often a hierarchy among the gods of a pantheon, and the gods can be territorial or associated with different features of reality. So, a main weakness of polytheism is that it gives a fragmented worldview. It is compatible with animism, fetishism, and idolatry. In Christendom, mariolatry and adoration of the saints psychologically approach the notion behind polytheism.

Q. Idolatry. Idol worship regards the idol as a symbol or habitation of the deity. Scripture speaks of dumb idols that cannot do anything, meaning that since what an idol represents does not really exist, only the idol itself exists. The god is as much the creation of human imagination as is the statue that depicts the god. The statue ends up being the god or goddess because it is the only thing that really exists; there is no more available from the god than is available from the statue.

The prohibition against the use of idols to represent Yahveh, the really existing God, probably lies in the fact that using idols "harms" more than it "helps." Having something tangible to focus on might "help" worshipers concentrate their attention, but psychological transfer occurs from the idol to the god it represents. What the idol enables the worshiper to focus on distorts the reality it represents. (a) In the person's mind the idol destroys the actual nature of the true God. Since the idol does not act, the god turns out to be inert and passive; the god is not "the living God." He is unconcerned about human affairs; he is not a god with "lovingkindness" toward us. The god is incapable of doing anything about human affairs; he is as weak as the statue that depicts him; he is not "omnipotent." The idol is silent; it is a "dumb idol"; it does not communicate with people. Idols, being inanimate, cannot represent personhood and, being material, cannot represent spiritual personhood. They cannot represent personhood, much less interpersonal experience, especially that between us and God. An idol is dumb; it cannot communicate (1 Corinthians 12:2; Habakkuk 2:18-19; Psalm 115:5). It is inactive (Isaiah 46:7; Jeremiah 10:5); it cannot be a living God. It is material—gold, silver, and stone (cp. Acts 17:27-

29; Romans 1:22-23; Psalm 115:4-5); it cannot represent what cannot be “located” and limited (Acts 17:24-25). Idolatry does more harm by perversion than the “good” it might seem to do in focusing attention.

Furthermore, since human hands have fashioned the idol that represents the god, (b) worshippers end up with a sense of control over the god, which they use to their own ends (cp. Acts 17:29b-31a; cp. the behavior of the Moabite king in Numbers 22-24). As artisans create gods in their own image and after the imaginations of their own heart (Ezekiel 14:7), they also put the god psychologically under their own control. They can manipulate the god to their own ends. The idol does not know the thoughts and intents of the worshipers’ hearts; so they can protect themselves against his knowing their secret thoughts; the god is not an “omniscient” or a “heart-knowing” God. People can use the god’s greater power to their own intents without revealing their self-interests. The effect of this tendency is to externalize the religious experience.

(c) Perhaps idols were forbidden because they represent an attempt to supplant faith with sight. People want to think that the only important things in life are the tangible ones. They want the apparent certainty that goes with having something material. If the true invisible God thought it was better to be seen to be worshipped, he could manifest himself to the worshiper.

(d) Syncretism tends also to result from idolatry. Some representation of another deity can be adopted with the name of this one, as the Israelites tried to identify Yahveh with the Egyptian bull-god Apis in the wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 32:4-5).

There is a different motivation between art and an object of worship. Making a representation of an angel, of Christ, and so on, is not so much the point as making it as an object of adoration and worship—an object to which a person can bow down. Even in the Old Testament there were two seraphs in the Holy of Holies.

The problem with icons and statues in Christianity is twofold. In the first place, (1) statues of the saints are improper because of who they are. Adoration vs. worship is a psychologically impertinent difference. The Old Testament forbade the bowing behavior toward them. Secondly, (2) they lack the very characteristics, and substitute the very characteristics, that statues in general have. No Christian has ever tried to make a statue of the Father or the Spirit. Even of Christ Paul says that we no longer know him after the “flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16), which is the nearest thing a statue or picture could represent.

R. Animism. All discrete objects have indwelling souls and possess conscious life. These spirits may exist in disembodied states as well and can possess and oppress people. Animism can connect with fetishism, described next.

S. Fetishism. Objects have magic powers that people can access in various ways.

T. Totemism. Tribes trace their descent from some ancestral plant or animal origin. It is a primitive form of evolution.

U. All views that theologize God into impersonal abstraction and reject the idea that God as ontic entity, eternal personal spirit with certain known and knowable attributes. God is a symbolic representation of some ideal or principle; he is a projection of human imagination like Freud’s idea that God is a projection of the father image.

Observations

Agnosticism and atheism are alike in not having a practical effect on human life. Agnosticism amounts to “practical atheism” because people cannot appeal to God as an explanation or guide if they have no certainty that he even exists.

Theism, deism, and the various forms of monotheism are alike in having a single transcendent God.

Polytheism, tritheism, monolatry, henotheism, and idolatry are alike in the belief that there is more than one God/god.

Pantheism and panentheism are alike in not having transcendent deity.

Idolatry, fetishism, and totemism are alike in having a physical connection with deity.

Monotheism, both forms of monarchianism/patripassianism/Sabellianism, trinitarianism, and deism are alike in having one God.