

[1973. In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

ATHEISM. See also *Skepticism; Theism*. Atheism, etymologically, names a philosophic view that denies the existence of God. In the nineteenth century the term Agnosticism was invented to designate a view that neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. Deism affirms a God who acts on the world only through the regularities of natural law. Theism (q.v.) allows for miracles and revelation. But the whole matter is not quite so simple.

In the first place, since there is no middle possibility between the existence and nonexistence of God, agnosticism escapes atheism only in name.

Democritus, La Place, and Nietzsche were, no doubt, atheists; but Spinoza constantly talks about God, *Deus sive Natura*, God, i.e., Nature. But if God and Nature are identical, is not this atheism?

Kant postulated God, Freedom, and Immortality as the necessary bases of morality. But he also insisted that God is not a constitutive concept (a concept of an existing being) but a regulative concept (a rule for the direction of our conduct). Is this not atheism?

In our century, Paul Tillich and Bishop Robinson have denounced an anthropomorphic deity who is “out there,” a cosmic policeman, and a theology of monarchic monotheism. For these authors God is not an entity besides the ordinary things of experience. He is being-as-such; which presumable means the common quality of existence in all that exists. But is this not as atheistic as Spinoza?

The trouble is that the word “God” is given no one definite meaning. Not only is Spinoza’s God utterly unlike Pascal’s, but on the level of positive religions Islam’s Allah, Hinduism’s Shiva, and the fetishes of animist have nothing in common. To say that “God” is the name of what one worships or serves does not give the term any concrete content. Nor does the definition of God as the “satisfier” (or alleged satisfier) of man’s needs do any better, for men do not agree on what they need.

It is, then, relatively unimportant whether or not a man believes in the existence of God. Existence is a pseudo-concept. The important question is, What is God? To this

Christianity gives a Trinitarian answer. And obviously the Trinity and Shiva have nothing in common.

For this reason one cannot discuss the ethical theory of atheism; there are too many varieties. Epicureanism, though it strangely asserted the existence of gods, was virtually atheistic; but no two ethical theories could be much more opposed than those of Epicurus and Kant. Similarly Spinoza and Nietzsche agree on nothing.

Twentieth century Humanism (q.v.) is a more unified movement and a measure of agreement in Ethics can be found among its exponents.

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