

Nontheism

Nontheism is a term that covers a range of both religious and nonreligious attitudes characterized by the absence of — or the rejection of — theism or any belief in a personal god or gods. It is in use in the fields of philosophy and general liberal theology. "Nontheism" should not be confused with "irreligion".

Non-theism has various types. "Strong atheism" is the positive belief that a god does not exist. Someone who does not think about the existence of a deity may be termed "weakly atheistic", or more specifically implicitly atheist. Other more qualified types of nontheism, are often known as agnosticism ... "Strong" or "positive" agnosticism is the belief that it is impossible for humans to know whether or not any deities exist. It is a more precise opinion than weak agnosticism, which is the belief that the existence or nonexistence of any deities is unknown but not necessarily unknowable. Anthony Kenny [a **British philosopher**] distinguishes between agnostics, who find the claim "God exists" uncertain, and theological non-cognitivists, who consider all God-talk to be meaningless.

Other related philosophical opinions about the existence of deity are ignosticism [the idea that the question of the existence of God is meaningless because the word "God" has no coherent and unambiguous definition] and skepticism [a questioning attitude or doubt toward knowledge claims in general that are seen as mere belief or dogma]. .Because of variation of the term "god", it is understood that a person could be an atheist in terms of certain portrayals of gods, while remaining agnostic in terms of others. Invented originally as a synonym for secularism it has become an umbrella term for summarizing various distinct and even mutually exclusive positions united by a naturalist approach [the idea that only natural laws and forces (as opposed to supernatural ones) operate in the universe], sometimes in the plural, nontheisms.

Origin and definition

While the Oxford English Dictionary does not define non-theism, it does define a "non-theist" as "not having or involving a belief in God, especially as a being who reveals himself to humanity." First recorded usage of Non-theism is by Holyoake [an English secularist, co-operator and newspaper editor] in 1852, who introduces it because

"Mr. Southwell has taken an objection to the term Atheism. We are glad he has. [...] We disuse it, because Atheist is a worn-out word. Both the ancients and the moderns have understood by it *one without God, and also without morality*. Thus the term connotes more than any well-informed and earnest person accepting it ever included in it; that is, the word carries with it associations of immorality, which have been repudiated by the Atheist as seriously as by the Christian. Non-theism is a term less open to the same misunderstanding, as it implies the simple non-acceptance of the Theist's explanation of the origin and government of the world."

[Section about hyphenating omitted.]

The *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* [written by Norman Geisler ... professor of apologetics and theology] has

"...in the strict sense, all forms of nontheisms are naturalistic including atheism, pantheism [the philosophical and religious belief that reality, the universe, and nature are identical to divinity or a supreme entity ... still expanding and creating, which has existed since the beginning of time.], deism [the belief in the existence of God, often an impersonal and incomprehensible God, who does not intervene in the universe after creating it ... without any reliance on revealed religions or religious authority] and agnosticism." (p. 252).

Pema Chödrön [an american-born tibetan buddhist nun] uses the term in the context of Buddhism:

"The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in God.[...] Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold [...] Non-theism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves [...] Nontheism is finally realizing there is no babysitter you can count on."

As per Religion wiki fandom 2024-10-07 with bracketed definitions taken from Wikipedia.

Definitions list

Agnostic: someone, who finds the claim "God exists" uncertain (but not theoretically impossible)

Deism: the belief in the existence of God, often an impersonal and incomprehensible God, who does not intervene in the universe after creating it ... without any reliance on revealed religions or religious authority.

Ignosticism: the idea that the question of the existence of God is meaningless because the word "God" has no coherent and unambiguous definition.

Naturalism: the idea that only **natural laws** and forces (as opposed to **supernatural** ones) operate in the **universe**.

Pantheism: the philosophical and religious belief that reality, the universe, and nature are identical to divinity or a supreme entity ... still expanding and creating, which has existed since the beginning of time.

Theological non-cognitivist: someone, who considers all God-talk to be meaningless.

Skepticism: a questioning attitude or doubt toward knowledge-claims in general that are seen as mere belief or dogma.

Linguistic appendix

Deus in latin and *theos* in greek have the same meaning: a personal God.

Gnostic comes from the greek word "gnosis" which means knowledge.

Mattias' theoretical reflexions:

- Formally there is no difference in meaning between the words atheist and nontheist. However it can be noted that

- The word nontheist was invented to make it possible to say you don't believe in God without distancing oneself from the moral commitment associated with religious belief.

- it also seems that the word nontheist, in usage, allows for an interest in and respect for religious beliefs in a different way than the word atheist including an interest in the possibility of something laying beyond the world we can see and touch, although nothing specific can be known about it.

- The positions pantheism, the belief that the universe, and nature are identical to a divinity, and deism, the belief in the existence of God, often an impersonal and incomprehensible God, who does not intervene in the universe after creating it, also lie within the permitted semantical space although my experience is that this isn't what quakers usually mean when they claim to be nontheists. Someone among us says he believes in the presence, but not in the existence, of God. Perhaps not a pantheistic position, but somewhat related to it.

Mattias' reflexions on attitudes:

- "Nontheism" should not be confused with irreligion" (end quote). Reasonably it's hard to be a quaker of any sort if you lack a sense of wonder and respect for the world and human existence. Michel Rosen [an English author, poet, presenter, political columnist, broadcaster and activist who is a professor of [children's literature](#)], commenting on the book "Religion without God" by Ronald Dworkin, concludes that "... even a fully secular individual should contemplate the universe, not just with curiosity and wonder, but with reverence and gratitude." Religious attitudes are possible without a belief in the existence of God.

- Chödrön, a buddhist nun, makes the alternative point that nontheism truly is about daring to be on your own. It turns out, she says, there is no God at hand to be your baby-sitter.

Questions

1. How would you describe yourself as a nontheist quaker? How did you come to define yourself in this way?
2. Please share your experiences as a quaker of this kind with other friends in the meeting.