

God, Atheism and Buddhism

By
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***Abstract:** This essay explores what is meant by the word 'God' in Christianity and how Buddhism might relate to this. Without appreciating what the word means it is impossible to understand what 'atheist' refers to or the positions that Buddhism might take.*

Even a relatively limited study of theological sources makes it clear that there is no agreement on the meaning of the word 'God'. The history of Christianity is one of continuous attempts to articulate a meaning for 'God' – in spite of the view that God is indescribable. This has involved rejecting or being atheistic towards certain definitions of 'God' or some qualities that are associated with 'God'.

Contemporary theologians have raised ideas of 'God' that are in some sympathy with Buddhist approaches and there is general agreement between Buddhist, Christian and atheistic sources that some concepts of 'God' are unhelpful and to be avoided; that language has to be used with great care when referring to complex and abstract qualities, and that there is a profound mystery to the universe and our human experience of this.

Some regard Buddhism as an atheistic philosophy. Some refer to it as non-theistic. But what do these terms mean? In order to arrive at a clearer understanding of any relationship between Buddhism and theism, we need to first explore some definitions.

Wikipedia offers what appears to be a simple definition of theism – 'theism is the belief that gods or divinities exist and interact with the universe' – but this just begs several questions and we still have to explore what is meant by, or understood by 'gods and divinities' as well as 'exists'.¹

At this point we enter a realm of multiple, and often conflicting, definitions and theories. Of the monotheistic religions Christianity appears to have the biggest range of views. A large theological industry has devoted itself over the past two millennia to elucidating the meanings of the word 'God' and no end to this theological creativity appears to be in sight.

Most Christians are aware of (and often embarrassed by) the confusion that abounds over definitions of God and have evolved a number of ways of dealing with this. A common tactic is just to avoid the issue and to speak about God as though the listener knows what is being referred to. This approach usually implicitly refers to an anthropomorphic super-being. If forced to take a position, the knowledgeable Christian may tailor his response to the situation and the perceived level of comprehension of the listener and use any of a wide range of more

¹ In this essay I am reflecting upon the term 'God' from a theological, semantic and religious perspective, not as an indicator of 'tribal' identity. Much of the recent interest in politician's beliefs is to do with which groups they publicly identify with. So stating that 'I believe in God' can be meant and interpreted as indicating loyalty to a particular (usually conservative with a small 'c') group rather than expressing a deep religious conviction, whilst stating that 'I am an atheist' identifies one as part of a different and opposing group. This particular use of 'God' as an identity marker requires a separate discussion.

modern theological definitions. These are often presented as ‘metaphors’ and this is a well-practised way of presenting just about any description at all as a definition of god.

Unfortunately, without picking our way through these definitions and metaphors, it is impossible to state what one is opposed or atheistic towards. Interestingly, most Christians would probably agree with the statement that the word ‘God’ refers to something ineffable. For example Richard Harries:

Theologians and mystics have always been acutely conscious of how limited our language is in talking about God. They have always stressed the crucial importance of the *via negativa*...the fact that everything we say about God is as untrue as it is true and therefore, we need to qualify and unmake images as soon as we have suggested them. (Richard Harries p.4 The Real God)

and

... “To speak appropriately of the holy mystery that makes and heals the world, but is not the world nor any item in it, is quite beyond the [analytic] resources of language.” God-talk is therefore, he repeats, inescapably metaphorical - that is the way its aspiration to truth is necessarily formed. “It is the tragedy of Western culture to have fallen prey to the illusion (widely shared by believer and non-believer alike) that it is perfectly easy to talk about God.”

Simon Barrow referring to Nicholas Lash in What difference does God make today? <http://www.ekklelesia.co.uk/node/4921>

Now without any question, one understanding of the Christian ‘God’ is as some sort of supernatural being that is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent. This super-being can do anything and is both intimately connected with the physical world of space and time and also outside of it. He (because it is almost invariably a He) is also available as an intimate personal friend to those who worship him.

The qualities of this super-being have changed over the millennia; he was a somewhat vicious bully in the Old Testament, but changed dramatically in the persona of Jesus in the New Testament. A problem here is that Jesus is equated with God in many people’s minds and hence reinforces the anthropomorphic image. The position of Jesus is described in the complex Trinitarian doctrine which was and is a ‘required belief’ laid down by the Council of Nicea in CE325 and enforced by emperor Theodosius in CE381. In the early days of Christianity there were many differing views of the nature of God and Jesus and their relationship. Unfortunately Theodosius’s decision froze a particular (and incomprehensible) view and suppressed further debate. (Freeman).

There is no doubt that many contemporary Christians believe in the image of a loving and wise super-being, a projection of the father figure, at least part of the time. The supernatural super-being model of God in its basic form is the one that Richard Dawkins rails against. I suspect that the current confusion in Christianity over ‘God’ and the embarrassment over past metaphors are some of the reasons that Dawkins has generated such high feeling. There is nothing as irritating as someone telling you what has been obvious for a long time, but are powerless to resolve, especially when the critic is considered to be inadequately qualified.

Interestingly, most Christian critics of Dawkins seem to agree that he has got it wrong, and that his description of God is not one that agrees with their own. So, apart from Christian literalist fundamentalists and conservative Christians in the third world, and quite a lot of Western Christians, modern, well-informed and moderate Christians tend to state that they do not believe in God as an invisible super-being.

Such modern and well-informed Christians are opposed to, and hence atheistic towards, the super-being definition of God and so are actually in agreement with Richard Dawkins on this point. As Dawkins himself points out, most Christians are also atheists with respect to Thor, Zeus, Dionysus, Mars, and numerous other gods of antiquity.

So the word 'atheist' has to have a clear context and refer to specific ideas of what the word 'God' means before we can know what we are for and against. Those Christians who disavow the definition of God as a supernatural figure, are atheistic towards this definition. Moreover, by accepting that such a well-known and traditional biblical representation of God is no longer acceptable, such Christians are also in agreement with atheists that at the very least we must be careful about believing in all of the ideas that we read or hear about god or gods. We need to explore and analyse 'god' ideas and reject some.

The Christian theologian, Nicholas Lash agrees that some ideas of God are 'corrupt' and need to be replaced by others:

This ... shift of meaning ... fundamentally corrupted and disabled the modern comprehension of 'God' – because God is, logically and necessarily, beyond definition (delimiting) and categorisation. God is most definitely not a 'thing' belonging to a class of things called 'gods' ... "Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists all have this, at least, in common: that none of them believe in gods", says Lash.

Simon Barrow What difference does God make today?
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/4921>

This leads us on to consider the modern views ('metaphors') of God that some Christians complain Richard Dawkins has ignored. Instead of studying the work of modern theologians, the charge is that Dawkins has adopted antiquated Biblical descriptions of God. The implication is that if he was better acquainted with modern theology he would find some well-argued and more acceptable explanations of what is meant by 'God' than the discredited male super-being idea. There is a further implication that recent theological reinterpretations of 'God' have replaced the old biblical descriptions.

Many Christians have long been aware that biblical ideas of 'God' are often unhealthy, inadequate and embarrassing, and have struggled to invent more acceptable definitions to replace the older versions. Some of these groups founded the Quakers, Unitarians and other non-conformist traditions in the 17th century.

Recent attempts to redefine or understand 'God' include that of John Hicks, a Presbyterian theologian, who talks about his concept of the 'Real' – the ultimate transcendent reality to which he believes the world's religions are culturally conditioned responses. Hicks' work does have some resonance for Buddhists. John Hicks (along with many others such as Paul Tillich, John Shelby Spong, Nicholas Lash and Don Cupitt to name but a few) is one of a number of recent theologians who are particularly concerned with language and how it relates to what is meant by the term 'God' and who are uncomfortable (often acutely so) with the old ideas of 'God' as a real 'object'.

Some theologians such as Don Cupitt and his 'Sea of Faith' network, in recognition of the problems associated with attempting to define 'God' as something real, have adopted a non-realist and post-modernist view that states that 'God' is a human creation. This at least legitimises the ceaseless creative work of theologians, poets and mystics, and frees from the yoke of dogma and fixed positions.

Sea of Faith is most closely associated with the non-realist approach to religion. This refers to the belief that God has no 'real', objective or empirical existence, independent of human language and culture; God is 'real' in the sense that he is a potent symbol, metaphor or projection, but He has no objective existence outside and beyond the practice of religion. Non-realism therefore entails a rejection of all supernaturalism - miracles, afterlife and the agency of spirits.

'God is the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims upon us and their creative power'. (Taking Leave of God, Don Cupitt, SCM, 1980) (http://www.sofn.org.uk/sof/who_we_are.html)

It is interesting that modern theology has reaffirmed that language is a key concern when referring to the transcendent and that it is far too easy to become blinded by metaphors and pointers – the language used. A common theme in recent theology is to stop seeing 'God' as an objective thing and start to see 'God' as a quality, abstraction, or potential human experience. This is similar to the ways that other abstract or complex ideas such as the word 'love' or 'nobility' can be viewed. These refer to desirable, admired and good, but rather diffuse or subjective, qualities that we can come to know.

I am, however, sceptical of the assertion that contemporary Christians familiar with modern theology have dispensed with the anthropomorphic super-being 'metaphor' since my experience is that Christians do not hesitate to refer to God in just this way. In fact this is the most common way they refer to God. What are we to make of these quotes taken pretty much at random from prominent Christians?

'Prophecy is no problem for a God who knows exactly what is going to happen at every time, and can put this information into the minds of any prophets at will'. (Keith Ward p135, A Guide for the Perplexed)'

'First, God has given us a real independence. He has created us rather than dreamt us. Second, God himself feels our anguish with us. Third, he is ceaselessly at work forcing even evil to yield some good. (Richard Harries p.66 The Real God)'

The whole universe exists because God has not held back his love but allowed it to flow without impediment out of his own perfection to make a world that is different from him and then to fill it with love through the gift of his Son. And our life as Christians, our obligations, our morality, do not rest on commands alone, but on the fact that God has given us something of his own life. (Rowan Williams, <http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000950.html>)

When we do examine the work of theologians, rather than finding a clear consensus on a modern view of 'God' we actually find a range of metaphors, theories, and approaches. Sophisticated Christians have their favourite theologians. Rather than resolving the question, modern interpretations just add to the very broad (and ambiguous) embroidery of Christian theology.

In fact none of the old ideas described in the Bible are superseded; new theological thinking just adds to them. The Christian arsenal of theories and concepts about 'God' is enlarged, but the old concepts linger on. The word "God" is not a blank slate on which theologians can write whatever definition they like, but is a slate covered with scribbles from many hands over many centuries. Perhaps this becomes a question of how legitimate it is to diverge from biblical and ancient descriptions of 'God' and still be considered Christian. And these are historically very sensitive questions for a faith that became obsessed with heresy and precise statements of doctrine early in its history (Freeman).

So where does this leave Buddhism? Given the lack of coherency in Christian ideas of ‘God’ is there anything which is in sympathy with Buddhist ideas? Buddhist teachings would certainly not support (and hence would be atheistic towards) the idea of an omnipresent, omniscient, benevolent super-being who created everything and was somehow the key to human flourishing. But more recent theological reflections that talk about the ‘ground of being’ or the ‘real’ or an inner realisation rather than an external object or ‘invisible magic friend’ seem closer to the heart of Buddhism.

The transcendent factor in Buddhism is called Nibbana (Nirvana). This is also referred to as the experience of the ‘unconditioned’. The realisation of Nibbana is not the cultivation of an absorbing idea that we are encouraged to fantasise about and take comfort in. It is a letting go of all mental objects. It is presented as an experience or maturation of the human mind which is of enormous value; it frees from unnecessary suffering and gives a complete perspective of the human situation. It might be called a knowing of ultimate reality or the absolute. The Buddha’s teaching is always concerned with the skilful cultivation of factors conducive to the realisation of Nirvana. Early Buddhist scriptures do not say a great deal about Nirvana, it was not personalised, worshipped (in any simplistic way) or made into an anthropomorphic entity.

As well as limiting speculation around ‘Nirvana’ the Buddha also taught that words and concepts – conceptual thought – are untrustworthy. As part of the conditioned world thought suffers from mutability (concepts can be hard to pin down and tend to change over time and in different minds); thought is also imperfect and actually beyond our or anyone else’s easy control – it is impersonal – even though it often has a quality of intimacy of ‘me-ness’ about it.

The teaching of Buddhism is directing us to understand the imperfect and untrustworthy nature of concepts and thoughts and learn to be able to pick them up and put them down in a flexible way without getting enchanted by them. Even our sense of enchantment tends to change and die: ideas that once gripped us gradually lose their lustre. This is why doubt is an inevitable result of the thinking process.

We are educated to be good at picking up and holding onto concepts (views, opinions, memories, theories, metaphors) but not into ways of putting them down through seeing their essentially uncertain and impersonal nature. We get captivated by our personal views and concepts.

When a concept becomes ‘obvious’ to us we tend to view others who do not hold the same view as ignorant or deluded or perverse. Buddhism states that all concepts including ideas of self and the world have the characteristic of uncertainty.

The Buddhist teachings are not making a new metaphysical doctrine to be believed in – that everything or everybody is untrustworthy – but are encouraging us to gain a perspective on the conditioned world. Buddhist teachings are consistent – all conditions are regarded as impermanent, imperfect and impersonal – including these words themselves.

So if we consider the word ‘God’ in the light of impermanence, imperfection and impersonality, what happens? We can check whether there is a common and agreed definition of ‘God’: as we have seen there are various definitions and these seem to be in a state of flux. The concept appears incoherent. We can check whether our own definition or understanding of ‘God’ is complete and stable. And we can check where our idea of ‘God’ came from. Is it ours or something we read or heard and got inspired by?

Having rejected the ‘invisible magic friend’ idea, and assuming that the word ‘God’ could be a pointer to a reality which can be known, a Buddhist approach would be to avoid settling on a personal definition of ‘God’; it is better to leave this as an open and creative potential rather

than attaching to my idea of 'God'. Anything we can conceive and conceptualise is just a conditioned creation of the imagination that can beguile and delude us if we grasp it as true and dependable. In Christian terms our idea becomes a false idol.

So this Buddhist view of 'God' is not denying or affirming it as a reality, but seeing that what we are considering is first and foremost a human construct: something that lots of others have had a hand in fashioning and we have interpreted according to our conditioning. This is not quite the same as believing in the non-realists assertion that 'God is a human construction'; although the view that 'ideas of God/s are human constructions' is more useful, as is 'all words and terms are human constructions' including ideas of realism or non-realism. This avoids either affirming or denying any reality which might be pointed to by the term 'God' but leaves the question open and potentially knowable.

So if we interpret 'God' as a name for the sense of the deep mystery of life or for a transcendent reality that is knowable then Buddhist teachings could be in accordance with this. If we imagine some bearded male superman with all sorts of supernatural attributes then this is just an unhelpful fantasy.

What we can agree on is that the question of how to identify or refer to a possible transcendent reality is a difficult and engaging one and that common ground can be found between those of different faiths, such as Buddhists and Christians and also those with varying degrees of atheism. Atheism, rather than being a clear fixed position in tension with a clear fixed opposite is more appropriately seen to be the function of discriminating between different complex sets of ideas and metaphors about the term 'God' and discarding those that are particularly deluded or dogmatic. This discrimination (or wisdom or intelligence) is exercisable by the religious as well as by those who are not. And this sense of discrimination is not something that is obtainable from a sacred (or any) book, but is rather what makes a sacred book useful (or not).

A sense of awe at the mystery of life is a widespread human perception that unites those of all faiths and none. All too often the debates between those labelled as 'atheist' and those labelled as 'religious' are based on polarised and simplistic stereotypes and are more to do with emphasising tribal boundaries and reinforcing old prejudices than with aiming for a genuine understanding of a complex area of human concern. The reality is that there is much more in common between thoughtful Christians, atheists, and Buddhists than we might think.

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