

Christian A-Theism

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
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There's an apocryphal story about the famous theologian, Paul Tillich, where someone comes up to him after one of his lectures and tells him that he didn't believe in God. Tillich responds by saying, "Tell me about this God that you don't believe in." So the man does this, and when he's finished, Tillich says to him, "Well, I don't believe in that God, either."

With his definition of faith as "ultimate concern," Tillich highlighted that the question is not "God or no God," but "what God?" Which one? What is it that commands your ultimate concern? What is your "ground of being?" Clearly this is always a mixed bag. And it is more clearly revealed and proclaimed with our actions than our words.

Where do I put my trust? Where do I find my hope? My happiness? What is my ultimate concern? It might be human nature. It might be economic security. It might be a supreme being who will rescue me. Your ultimate concern might be love and justice. (Justice is what love looks like in public, says Cornel West.) If your ultimate concern is love, then this is one description of the Christian faith. In the First Letter of John, it says another word for "God" is "love," after all. It might be a mysterious, loving presence that holds us. And probably, it's some kind of mixture. One can say that the question of God is not "if" but "what?"

Some years ago John Shelby Spong came out with a book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2008). And it's a good introduction into what I would call a "new" or "alternative" Christianity, a kind of Christianity that is so desperately needed in the world today, it seems to me. And without these alternatives, the church will slide deeper and deeper into irrelevance, it seems to me, and it will fade away.

There's a portion in the book where Spong describes an encounter with a religion writer named Andrew Brown, who asked Spong about his concept of God after touring the diocese.

I responded by saying that the intellectual revolution of the past five to six hundred years had rendered the traditional God concept unbelievable... This meant that I could no longer think of God as being "up there" or "out there" who could and would intervene, answer prayers and reward and punish according to the divine will. In his story, published a couple weeks later, he went on the say that no matter how creative or innovative this bishop may be, in the last analysis he really no longer believed in God and had in fact become an "atheist bishop."

Now, Spong did not take kindly to this remark and pointed out that most religious writers, alas, are out of their element and have no theological training. In my own experience, I'd say that this is true. And I'd add that often reporters love to sensationalize to grab the attention of the reader, and this often distorts and misleads.

The assumption behind what Spong called the writer's "profoundly ignorant conclusion" is that one either believes in this "traditional" view of God or no God at all, and that there are no other options.

I believe that there is a third option. And this third option is absolutely vital.

In the larger church today, almost 100% of the congregations allow only option #1. That is, if you want to be a member of that congregation, you must make a profession of faith in this traditional God.

Perhaps we are one of those few congregations that allows the second option for its members. That is, one can claim a different image of God and be a full member, taking the covenant vows to participate and support this church. In every church I've served, I've had people who didn't believe in a supernatural deity but wanted to follow the path of Jesus.

And today, I want to highlight the third option that is available, and this is a belief in a very different kind of God.

This is not a novel idea that originated from Spong, by the way. The alternative understanding of God and of Jesus has existed on the periphery of this church, in the margins, throughout its history. And the church has driven it out, declared it heresy and persecuted those who dared to utter an alternative view.

As you know, I know about the larger church's practice of purging and purifying itself from personal experience. The church will allow difference and dissent, but often only within a narrow framework. It will allow honesty and self-disclosure, but only within certain limits.

Dorothee Sölle, a theologian who taught at Union Seminary in New York, once wrote,

With our lives, we testify belief in one of two Gods: either an omnipotent idol that controls and arranges everything, or the God of hope who works alongside us.

The "omnipotent idol," as Sölle called it, is the traditional God, even among non-believers or very nominal Christians. Time and time again, I've encountered people, who for most of their lives, have had absolutely no interest in God. But when tragedy strikes and there is a crisis, they speak of a God who "is in control," and with whom nothing happens "without His consent" (it's almost always a "He.") This is the default concept of God: all-powerful, all-controlling. Almost everyone, it seems, is unaware of another kind of God and would not dare to imagine it.

Sölle was an advocate of this third option, an alternative between the traditional God or no God at all. In her experience, she said,

*God is not an interventionist.
God is an intentionalist, working through us and alongside us.*

Spong talked about this intervening, supernatural, all-powerful God as the "theistic" understanding of God. Theism, according to Spong, emerged as a human coping mechanism to the anxiety of living.

Human beings began to ask questions like these: Is there someone or some presence in the universe like me, self-conscious and aware, but possessing more power than I possess, and able to thereby cope with the anxieties of existence that I now face? ...How can I win the favor of this being?

Spong continued about the development of theism,

They witnessed vital natural forces in the world... Some power must animate these things and make them able to do the things they do, they reasoned. Could that power protect and defend them also?

So theism emerged from a pre-scientific world, and what Spong and others have tried to do is separate the Jesus of history from the miraculous claims that derived from a supernaturally oriented world. And from this, a different understanding of God emerges. In the end, Spong embraced the label of “atheist bishop.” He pointed out,

The word, ‘atheist,’ does not mean, as people commonly assume, one who asserts that there is no such thing as God. It means, rather, that one rejects the theistic definition of God. It is quite possible, therefore, to reject theism without rejecting God.

And so there is this third option, call it being a “Christian atheist,” that needs to be sheltered and welcomed and nurtured today. The prefix of the letter, “A,” means “not” or “without.” So atheism means literally “without theism.” One can believe in God “without theism.” And I agree with Spong that unless we make this possible, unless we change “the literalized, dated and inoperative language of our faith... Christianity will die.” But this change, if it ever happens, will take a long time, and the larger church will vigorously and, in some cases, violently, resist it.

Four decades ago, when I was in seminary and preparing for the ministry, the book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), had just hit the world by storm, selling millions of copies. I want to share a book review given, by all people, Chuck Colson, of Watergate fame and founder of his own prison ministry. Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose son died at age 14 of a tragic illness, affirmed that God is indeed all-loving, but that God is not all-powerful; the bad things which happen are simply out of God’s control. The rabbi famously wrote, “I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die.” This was upsetting to Colson, who wrote,

...The god Kushner writes about is neither omnipotent nor sovereign, and is, therefore, not the Creator God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the all-powerful God revealed in the holy Bible. Yet people gobble up the book, clamoring for this impotent god...

Kushner’s simple message, by the way, is not original. For 60 years, “process” theology, so-called, has been spreading like a cancer through the church, dismissing the power of God as non-crucial. “The goodness of God is more important,” says John Cobb, a leading process theologian. So God isn’t dead, as the liberals of the early 60s argued; now, they say, He’s just sick and feeble.

And then Colson concluded,

We need to rouse ourselves, take our stand on the holy Word of God, and label heresy as heresy.

Like Colson, many others are derisive of a non-traditional, non-theistic God. They want power, force and might.

Someone once said that that most influential person in Christian history wasn't Jesus but Plato. Because it is Platonism where we find this dualism, this split, between matter and spirit, between the supernatural and natural, between the world and an omnipotent, theistic, intervening deity.

And yet, Jesus himself began to challenge this kind of God, and embodied a way, a path, that was not based on strength and might, but gentleness and weakness. The apostle Paul wrote that God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) A theistic view of perfection is absolute power. The alternative understanding of perfection is weakness and vulnerability.

The life and message of Jesus indicates that heaven's only power is love. God isn't a physical being that can act with physical, violent force, but a spiritual presence with the power of loving intent. And the question of which God we worship is important. There's a great line that someone has said: "Your image of God creates you." A narrow God creates narrow people; a big God creates big people.

Perhaps this understanding of God, this a-theistic view of God, will always be on the margins of institutional religion, which is, of course, where Jesus was—with the outsiders, the unclean, the poor, forgotten and hungry, the sick and lame, the widows, orphans and immigrants, the weak and vulnerable. And in his life, as in the life of the sages of other religious traditions, we see a worship and devotion not to power but love.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)