



POLYTHEISM → MONOTHEISM → ATHEISM (see the progression?)

Our ancestors once believed in – no, worshipped (more about the difference later) – pantheons of deities. But in Egypt, in the 14th Century BCE, the pharaoh Amenhotep IV, better known as Akhenaten, introduced a form of monotheism. This did not take root and little else is known of the matter. There were no newspapers, magazines or even private diaries to record the details of events and controversies of the time. Nor were there any pundits or social scientists to consider and leave their opinions and assessments. Indeed, that Akhenaten had even existed was not appreciated until archaeological discoveries of the 19th Century. Evidently ancient Egyptians were simply not ready to give up their traditional religion. Just as apparently, even a pharaoh could not do much about it.

Of course, monotheism returned. By a thousand years later it had grown up among the ancient Jews in opposition to the prevailing polytheistic traditions. The Hebrew Torah clearly shows that it began as monolatry, the idea that many gods existed but only one was to be worshipped. In addition, there was a trend towards making divinity less concrete and more abstract, extending even to its name. So, for example, although the Torah deity was known as El and Yahweh/Jehovah, when Moses asks the name he is told “I am that I am.” [Exodus 3:14]. The prohibition on “graven images” is made at that same time. The break between a traditional deity with specific human-like attributes – the “angry god” who commits and orders genocide – is especially noticeable between the Torah and the Gospels. Nor did Jesus ever apply a proper name to “the Father.”

In the 4th Century CE, Christian monotheism was legalized by Constantine and then made the state religion. Of course, by then the name of the deity was “Jesus” and there were many minor divinities in the form of angels, demons and saints. The deity had also become “triune,” though Constantine himself, when he formally converted towards the end of his life, was baptized into the Arian strain of Christianity that rejected the claim that Jesus was “consubstantial” with the Father. Whatever the details, it is clear that by then people were ready to let go of explicit polytheism. Constantine was success-

ful where Akhenaten was not, but surely not because he was more clever or powerful.

But why did this happen? What drove this trend? Most probably it was contributed to by a decline in the worship of deities in the form of strict adherence to a multitude of rituals connected with virtually every act of everyday life. Belief came to the fore as the rituals receded. Again, we see this break when comparing the Torah with the New Testament. Paul, the author of the earliest-known Christian texts, says about the divine-commanded practice of circumcision: “But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter.” [Romans 2:29] This way of looking at things would be more acceptable as people were becoming more aware of, mixing, mingling, trading and interbreeding with other people from very different cultures and religions.

And who would have been the chief instigators of this sort of cultural change? Who would have pointed out that religious rituals were done one way by one tribe and another way – or not at all – by another tribe and “the gods” didn’t seem to care? What sort of people would have noticed and called attention to the many inconsistencies and contradictions of supernatural practices and beliefs both within and between traditions? Atheists and other religious skeptics, that’s who. Indeed, we know (by way of Plato) that it was Socrates who pressed the question: did the gods love what is good because it is good, or did the gods loving something make it good?

Now what would have been the natural response of the targets of this sort of critique? Probably, it was to do as Paul did and urge that the absurd should not be taken “in the letter.” Others would have extolled the difficulties as “a mystery” or attacked the critics as atheists and troublemakers. Another approach would be to deny the applicability of the criticisms. Jesus famously did this when pressed as to who would be married to whom in the afterlife when people had remarried after being widowed by saying “they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.” [Matthew 22:30] Jesus’ answer is, of course, unsatisfactory. But, clearly, this would not have even made

it into the Gospels unless the believers of the time recognized that the challenge was a serious one and deserved a response.

This trend – towards shrinking the number of gods as well as their direct involvement in everyday affairs and even the attributes ascribed to them – has continued. On the one hand, this frustrates some religious skeptics, at least those who prefer the easy targets of, say, fundamentalist biblical inerrantists. On the other hand, it is a better thing for everyone when believers retreat into a Spinozan/Einsteinian position of the divine as a depersonalized principle of physics or something equivalent such as the pitiful “God is Love!” claim. At least the deity who “does not play dice with the universe” doesn’t care what people do when it comes to such things as sex and contraception.

To the extent that views of the divine have become more abstract and depersonalized, it is because the less abstract and more personalized were exposed as absurd. Someone had to do that and it could only have been religious skeptics whether they were forthright atheists or not. They were, at the least, atheists with respect to the deities of their time. They were people who, in response to claims that “god is this” and “god is like that,” replied by saying “no, I am not persuaded, and here is why.”

From our modern vantage point it might even be said that these religious skeptics have driven all the progress in religion over human history. For where else would the believers’ gradual adoption of the idea that “God” is “ineffable” and in some sense, really, incomprehensible, have come from? At bottom, how is this idea really any different than the atheist view that the idea of the divine is absurd, nonsensical or meaningless? When “God” is made to say that “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts,” [Isaiah 55:9] how can it be said that the deity really has any “ways” or “thoughts” at all?

It seems that the most advanced theology must converge with “atheology.” That is, if someone can describe, explain, imagine or even conceive of a deity, then it is not a “God” worthy of the name. Any idea of the divine is, in a way, if not “the letter,” a sort of “graven image.” In rejecting ideas of “God,” atheists are actually more pious than believers!

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“NTCOF TURNS
21 YEARS OLD !”
>>> Sunday, February 1st, 2015 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
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Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. Today we meet at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

“To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise: ... I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.” - Thomas Jefferson

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The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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