

Theism vs. Atheism

Theism: “The existence of God can be proved in five ways.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, art. 3).

Atheism: “Denial of a personal God who is totally distinct from the world he created.” (Fr. John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary*).

“We find ourselves before a powerful wave of secularization that seeks to build a world free of God. In our societies, we are also seeing a proliferation of varied forms of religiosity that have nothing to do with a personal relationship with the God of love, but are new manifestations of a disembodied spirituality” – *Dilexit nos*, ¶87

In Pope Francis’ last encyclical before he died, he points out – over and over again – the grave danger of secularization. The human race, according to Francis, is staring down a powerful current of secularization, which finds its identity in being free from God. But while secularization offers man the false reality of freedom without God, authentic Christianity offers man the truth that *there is no freedom without God*.

For a human being to believe that there is a God (theism), it necessarily follows that nothing in existence has its identity, purpose or essence separate from God. As God is the Prime Mover, nothing in existence can be sustained on its own, for it is created and held in existence by God. For a human being, then, to believe that there is no God (atheism), it necessarily follows that everything in existence has its identity, purpose or essence completely in itself or in some other created thing. As there is no Prime Mover, according to the atheist, everything in existence is self-sustaining. Here, we may begin to see why atheism is intrinsically linked to secularism. For the atheist, man is not in need of God because he does not attribute his existence to Him. In contrast, for the theist, man *is* in need of God because he attributes his initial and continued existence to Him. The general breakdown is this: The atheist does not live in obedience to anything other than himself or some other created thing, nor does he give thanks to the Prime Mover, and this is the case because his initial and continued existence are not dependent upon a God who created him. The theist must attempt to live in obedience to God, and he is bound to give thanks to Him because that is who he credits his very existence and life to.

These worldviews are no small matter as they profoundly affect the individual and society. As Pope Francis highlights the proliferation of “forms of religiosity that have nothing to do with a personal relationship with the God of love,” he is echoing something Pope St. John Paul II stated in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason). Calling out the “various forms of atheistic humanism,” Pope John Paul states that ...

“They did not hesitate to present themselves as new religions serving as a basis for projects which, on the political and social plane, gave rise to totalitarian systems which have been disastrous for humanity” (¶46).

Atheistic humanism, as Pope John Paul called it, presents itself as a new religion that has disastrous effects for humanity. How could simply not believing in God harm humanity? How could this deeply personal decision to reject a Prime Mover harm humanity? On the individual level, to reject reality is always harmful because we were made to know truth and to live in accordance with it. And on the societal level, human beings are social creatures and so everything we think and do impacts our neighbors.

“Man is by nature a social [or political] animal” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a3-4).

Rejecting truth is a detriment to one’s own humanity because the identity, purpose and essence of man is intrinsically connected to the fullness of truth itself. Denying God is wholly unreasonable and harmful to the life of man. Aquinas spells out why this is the case with his famous “five ways” argument. According to St. Thomas (*ST*, I, q. 3, art. 3), God exists because ...

1. “Whatever is in motion is put in motion by another”
2. “There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself”
3. “That which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing”
4. “There must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God”
5. “Whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence”

It is the last of the famous “five ways” that will best help us to understand the true goodness of theism and, as such, the real danger of atheism. To recognize one’s intelligence (i.e., ability to reason), according to Aquinas, one must recognize that they were endowed with it. And more so, to put that intelligence to use and pursue truth – which is the end to which we move towards – one must recognize that they are being directed by God.

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves” (*Fides et Ratio*, §1).

The theist is reasonable in that he uses his innate desire to know truth. The atheist is unreasonable because he either ignores or completely rejects his innate desire to know truth. The atheist has his reasons, though. Oftentimes, he does not fully understand how a good God can allow so much suffering, or illness, disease, natural disasters, etc. But where atheism leads to despair and confusion about these hard realities, theism provides an answer: God is not only the Creator, but He is personal and loving. And this God made all of creation good, with the purpose of glorifying Himself. In this grand scheme, man not only lives to glorify God, but to share and participate in that glory as well. The theist has hope because creation is good, life has meaning, and there is an afterlife; the atheist is bound to despair because creation – including his own existence – is without intelligent design and purpose.