

Are Atheists Rejecting the Wrong God?

As a theist, I often sympathize with people who call themselves atheists. For when they describe the god in whom they disbelieve—who usually turns out to be a vindictive ogre, or some sort of super-alien—I find myself agreeing that I don't believe in *that* deity either. Indeed, before there can be useful discussion of the question whether God exists, the interlocutors need to get clear with each other about what they mean by "God".

It's not an easy task. It involves framing and asking a lot of careful questions. But I have found the task rewarding as well as necessary, even when agreement about the existence of God is not reached.

That is why a survey newly published by the Pew Forum, the best among poll-takers on matters religious, is so useful. Its title is one of the necessary questions: ["When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?"](#). The whole thing is well worth reading. While the sub-questions aren't as theologically fine-grained as sophisticated believers might like, they, too, need to be asked. The answers produced interesting results.

For example, "the rise of the nones" in America, the "religiously unaffiliated," has already been [well-documented](#) and widely discussed. They now constitute at least a fifth of the adult population. But people who put themselves in that category aren't necessarily irreligious. As the new poll indicates, a majority of the religiously unaffiliated actually do believe in some sort of "higher power/spiritual force." A few even believe in "God as described in the Bible." They just don't identify with any particular "organized"

religion.

That isn't widely known, but it shouldn't be terribly surprising. Distrust of established institutions in general has been [rising](#) among Americans for decades. Given that context, it makes sense that some people who believe in some sort of deity distrust *religious* institutions, and accordingly are not affiliated with a religion in any formal sense. There's logical space for that too. After all, not joining or attending church, temple, or mosque doesn't necessarily mean you're a complete atheist.

The converse also holds: Membership or participation in some faith community doesn't necessarily mean you believe in the deity ostensibly worshipped by that community. (In fact, the "faith" of a few such communities is barely distinguishable from that of secular humanism—for example, Unitarian Universalism.) As Pew [found](#) last year, roughly a quarter of Americans say they are "spiritual but not religious." That's a slightly higher percentage than that of the "nones," and from this statistic, we may infer that some people who affiliate with a faith community just don't think that amounts to being "religious." Often, it seems, they believe in some vague, generic "higher power"; their greatest interest is in the social dimensions of belonging to a faith community. It's important to bear that in mind when people deny they are "religious"—just as it's important to remember that some Americans who sincerely believe in God as described in the Bible are [quite averse](#) to the very word "religion".

To me, however, the most interesting results of the Pew Survey were the answers to a few of the more theologically specific questions. I'll take just one example, for the sake of illustrating the point I began with.

More than 80 percent of Americans who "believe in God as described in the Bible" also believe they have been "rewarded" by God at some point(s) in their lives. However, only a bit

more than half that number believe they have also been “punished” by God at other points in their lives. A similar proportion holds for the general belief in heaven and hell: twice as many believe in the existence of heaven versus hell.

So, the majority of Americans who believe in God do not believe that God punishes them in this life or the next. Yet, many atheists find the God of the Bible repulsive because he seems to them cruel and vindictive, not only toward unbelievers but also toward those believers who break the rules.

Thus, the God whom many atheists reject for moral reasons is not really the God whom the majority of American theists believe in. Something to be kept in mind in your next discussion of these topics.

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