

The God who does **NOT** exist



by Roy Lawrence

It is quite fashionable to be an atheist these days. If you switch on the TV and watch a drama in which one of the characters claims to be a Christian, that person will often be portrayed as brainless and bigoted.

Atheists, on the other hand, tend to be shown in a much more sympathetic way. In consequence they are often much readier to air their opinions than used to be the case.

This means that it is not uncommon for me to find myself having a discussion with someone who has little or no faith. I corresponded with one such man for over a year after he had read something I wrote. None of the following is likely to surprise you. But what may come as a surprise is that often I find myself telling unbelievers that I don't believe in the God they don't believe in either!

It seems to me that atheists often construct a totally mistaken mental image of God, and then they very properly reject this product of their own invention. They set up a sort of "Aunt Sally god", and then very properly knock it down again. I would knock it down, too. The trouble is that these people sometimes think they have disposed of the only God there is, and I find myself longing that they could have just a glimpse of who God really is, because things might change dramatically if they did.

So, although the title of this article may surprise you, it is important that we should identify some of the commonest mistakes about God. Clearing away the clutter of the bogus gods who lurk in some people's minds can help us if we find ourselves discussing the existence of the one true God, and can also ensure that there are no traces of those false gods in our own thinking. Here, then, are five gods who do not exist.

The god who is just plain boring

Some years ago I was invited to give a talk in a youth club on the subject of "The Seven Deadly Sins". There was a gratifyingly high attendance and before the talk started, I decided to do some audience research. "How many of you", I asked, "would have stayed away if my topic tonight had been 'The Seven Principal Virtues'?" Most of them admitted they would have stayed away. Sin, they thought, was a bit spicy, but virtue struck them as very dull, and when I pressed

them further, many of them said that they thought of God himself as dull.

However, just in terms of logic, this cannot be true. Think of the most interesting things in the world. If God exists, he must be at least as interesting as they are. A dull God could not create a fascinating world. The most fascinating music, the most fascinating art, the most fascinating people can be no more than a pale reflection of the God who created them. Theology, the search for God, has to be a fascinating quest. God forgive the Church if we have made it seem otherwise.

The god with a crab-apple face

Another false god is the god who is essentially negative, the "misery-gut god", the "god with a crab-apple face", the god whose main aim is to stop us having fun. Before I was ordained, one of the girls in my Sunday school class came to me and said: "Don't do it, Mr Lawrence. Just think, you won't ever be able to smoke, you won't ever be able to drink, you won't ever be able to have any fun any more". A rotten Sunday school teacher I had been! It seems I had given her a picture of a god who was thoroughly negative. Once again, in terms of simple logic, this cannot be. Creation is essentially a positive process; it cannot stem from a negative force.

The Bible is keen that we should know the real God as a God of joy. The Psalmist says to God: "In your presence is fullness of joy, at your right hand is pleasure for evermore".¹ Jesus takes up the same theme, as he promises his followers:

"I am come that my joy should be in you".²

The god who is a million miles away

During one of my periods as a part-time hospital chaplain, I remember coming face to face with a trade union official who was a patient in one of my wards, and who was far from pleased to see me. When I stood at the end of his bed during the course of a ward round, he glared at me and said: "I don't need the likes of you. I can probably tell you far more about God than you can ever tell me".

Rather cheekily I replied: "All right then, I'll test you. I'll ask you one or two simple questions, and we'll see how much you know". The first question I asked him was: "Where is God?"

"That's easy", he replied. He pointed up with his finger. "God's up there in heaven", he said.

"Do you mean", I asked him, "that if we were to take a space ship and travel in the direction you were pointing, sooner or later we would arrive at a place called heaven and we could get out and have a look at God?"

"That sounds daft", he said.

"It is daft", I agreed.

He went onto the attack. "All right, if you're so clever, you tell me where God is."

"He's here", I told him.

"What, in this ward?", he asked.

"Yes", I said. "You may not see him, you may not hear him. But he's here." I can picture him now, as he looked up and down the ward and then said: "Strewth, it's as good as science fiction, isn't it!" We actually went on to become rather good friends.

Once we start to think about it, this god who is a million miles away, out of reach, out of touch, this "absentee landlord" god makes no sense at all.

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If God ceased to be involved in life as a whole, then life would cease to be. As scripture says: "In him we live and move and have our being".³ And this brings us to our next false god.

The 111 god

A lot of people seem to believe in a god who is for emergencies only, a sort of almighty aspirin, to whom we go only if we have a big headache. It is, of course, good to know that we can go to God in times of trouble, but it is a real waste to confine him to times of crisis. God not only wants to make the bad times bearable, but also to make the good times better—and better and better.

I often remember a visit I once paid to an elderly lady. We started to talk about prayer, and I asked her when she prayed and what sort of things she prayed about. I will never forget her answer. "Bless you", she said. "I never stop praying. I talk to him every day and all the day. I talk to him about everything." How right she was.

The casino god

This final false god is a theological version of Lady Luck. Many of the people who go to God as a 111 service also seem to think of him in this way. You may get lucky with him, or you may not. It depends on how he's feeling, which side of his heavenly bed he happened to get out of that morning. But this sort of

variable god has no place at all in the Christian faith. God is absolutely self-consistent. In the words of St James, in God there is "no variability, no shadow cast by turning".⁴ His will is constant and it is always for our good. In fact the proper purpose of prayer is not so much to persuade God to do what we want, but rather to find out what he wants and then to align our wills to his, because his will and purpose are always for the absolute best.

So what is the real God like?

If the boring god, the negative god, the distant god, the god for emergencies only, and the variable god are all bogus—if they are all gods who do not exist—is there any way in which we can discover God as he really is? Thankfully, the answer is a simple and positive "Yes!"

The way to sharpen up our picture of God is to look into his word, the Holy Bible. Why not take a look at what it says? If you need help, write to us at *Inside Life*.

Notes

- ¹ Psalms 16:11.
- ² John 15:11.
- ³ Acts 17:28.
- ⁴ James 1:17.

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Some people think that believing in God is like gambling: you may get lucky with him, or you may not.