The Idea of God:
A Chronological and Philosophical View of Theism, Atheism, And the War between the Two

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Christianity has shaped the world for the past two thousand years. According to the CIA World Factbook, one-third of the world practices some sort of denomination of Christianity.[1] The problem with this listing from the Factbook is that it does not take into account the schisms of faith that have fractured the faith from the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and every point leading to the formation of Christianity itself. In addition, the proliferation of Atheism is an important concept to view when discussing religion. Originally starting as a product of searching for truth, we see Atheism evolve into something that stands vehemently against any form of religion in modern society. When looking chronologically at the Christian faith, we see ourselves with a drastically different example of theology upon examination of ancient origins to the modern "everyone is saved" mentality of the current church. This paper aims to examine the transformation of the Christian religion, as well as examining the conflict between modern atheism and modern Christianity.

Before jumping into the examination of sources, some terminology needs to be explained. Of prime importance is the concept of transcendence. To be transcendent is to be beyond any possible understanding in the eyes of man. No matter how hard one tries to focus on a transcendent ideal, they will not come to understand it, simply because of it being something so far beyond the possible understanding of man. In the concept of ancient religion, God was a transcendent being, one that man could never fully understand, or process how he worked. When viewing the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, we will have a very obvious example of what a transcendent deity actively represents. Transcendence ties in well with another concept of Pseudo-

[1] CIA World Factbook. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html

Dionysius', that of the supermundane. To be supermundane is to go move beyond your rung on the ladder of the divine hierarchy.[2] A man who becomes more than man is one who becomes supermundane. Another important pair of terms are well-known for their synergy, and they are "sacred" and "profane". Mircea Eliade, a religious historian, termed sacred as having qualities that appear as a manifested truth, to mortals.[3] Sacredness isn't exclusive to religion, and can differ from person to person. As an example, an atheist can celebrate their birthday, giving it a sacred quality to them, but not to a different person. In contrast, profane is simply the absence of the sacred in the mortal life. It should be noted that profane is not in itself something inherently sinful or of vice. It is merely the lack of a sacred quality, the normal constant of the world. Eliade uses the example of a stone being a stone, until the moment it becomes sacred. It is still a stone, but also has a supernatural quality that marks it as different.[4] The last term to introduce is Hierophany. Hierophany occurs when the sacred manifests itself in a physical way. A very obvious example for a Christian is Jesus Christ, a physical manifestation of the sacredness of God in the Christian faith. With the terminology out of the way, we can now jump into the meat of the topics.

One of the best ways to start will be taking a more in-depth look at Pseudo-Dionysius[5] the Areopagite and his writings on Christianity. Writing in the sometime between the fifth and sixth century, much of Dionysius' writings were attributed to his

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[2] Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Heavenly Hierarchy* Caput I section III. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_13_heavenly_hierarchy.htm

[3] Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion.* New York: Harcourt Brace 1959.

[4] Eliade. *Sacred and Profane* 12.

[5] Henceforth to be referred to as Dionysius, in interest of integrity of the original sources and ease of writing. The original will be maintained as Dionysius the Areopagite.

original namesake, referenced in Acts 17:34.[6] The writings were carried by reputation of name until the 1500s, when closer examination revealed the writings to be much younger than the original Dionysius. In examination of the *Preface to Mystic Theology,* Dionysius constructs the nature of God to his readers. In it, he describes that "God is not matter----soul, mind, spirit, any being, nor even being itself, but above and beyond all these."[7] Dionysius believes in a transcendent God, one who beyond any possibility of being, yet still, convolutedly in the mind of man, still exists. From God we are given the divine hierarchy, which places all beings below God into an order of being. Below God are placed the divine beings, the cherubs and seraphs, down to the angels. From there, we have man, and then woman. Below that are the animals, then the plants, and then the minerals. The divine hierarchy is placed into a cycle of being, where the closer you are to God, the more you have transcended. That being said, God is still unknowable, according to Dionysius. As mentioned earlier in the terminology section, Dionysius also ascribes to the idea of one becoming supermundane, and being able to rise above their original stations in life. Man can become as the angels if he attempts to transcend. From the *Mystic Theology,* Dionysius notes:

> "Then he (Moses) is freed from them who are both seen and seeing, and enters into the gloom of the *Agnosia;* a gloom veritably mystic, within which he closes all perceptions of knowledge and enters into the altogether impalpable and unseen, being wholly of Him Who is beyond all, and of none, neither himself nor other; and by inactivity of all knowledge, united in his better part to. the altogether Unknown, and by knowing nothing, knowing above mind." [8]

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[6] *The Holy Bible* King James Version. Acts 17:34, "Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among them which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."
[7] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. *Preface to Mystic Theology.* *http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_05_preface.htm*
[8] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. *Mystic Theology.*

The "gloom" that Dionysius discusses is the unknown for man. As we become closer to God and become supermundane, the darker the path gets for man, simply due to impossibility to fully comprehend or understand what it actually means to become transcendent. Of course there is no record of this, as any man who goes beyond his earthly ties has no need to remember how to do it. Overall, Dionysius gives us an image of a divine hierarchy that is constantly upward moving, with those who wish to constantly becoming more than they are, in an attempt to reach transcendence.

From Dionysius, we move onto Thomas Aquinas. Active in the thirteenth century, we will be looking at his concept of his known as "analogic language." Analogic language is a simple practice that attributes concepts to God, the most common being "God is good." Being that God is transcendent, it is impossible for us to fully understand his being, so general statements are the safest to apply to Him. Gavin Hyman remarks that this allows people to understand something of God, but that the something they understand is not fully true.[9] Aquinas is noted as saying "In this life our minds cannot grasp what God is in himself; whatever way we have of thinking of his is a way of failing to understand him as he really is. So the less determinate our names are and the general and simple they are, the more appropriately they may be applied to God."[10] By using general terms that do not put an exact label on God, He remains unknown to man, but man still has some way to attribute the qualities they believe that God represents. In this we have a transcendent God, that can still have qualities that man can improve to become more than man.

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[9] Hyman, Gavin. *A Short History of Atheism*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. 51.
[10] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 13, 11. Quoted in Cupitt, 'Kant and the Negative Theology', p. 58. Quoted in Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* 51-52.

With Aquinas' language, we move forward into the Renaissance with the help of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Born in 1463 to Italian nobles, Pico briefly studied Canon law, and penned many works, including the *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* which will be placed to closer examination soon. Many of Pico's theses were deemed heretical by Pope Innocent VIII, but were eventually overturned by Pope Alexander VI in 1493.[11] The *Oration* and what it represents for man is what we will be focusing on in this paper.

The *Oration on the Dignity of Man* provides us the idea that man is able to move in both directions of the divine hierarchy. Pico notes that man is not distinctly set in his position due to his composition being something beyond the creatures of the earth and angels of the sky, who were each set in their places by God himself.

> We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.[12]

Pico notes that man is not a creature that is to be above or below, and that he has the capacity to place himself on the hierarchy however he chooses to be. The dignity of man is exactly this; that we are able to place ourselves wherever we want to be, due to our Creator's gift, and our determination. That being said, man can move both up and down the hierarchy, based on their actions. As Pico notes, "If vegetative, he [man] will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly

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[11] Copenhaver, Brian, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/pico-della-mirandola.

[12] Giovannia Pico della Mirandola. *Oration on the Dignity of Man.* Web edition. University of Adelaide. Updated 17 Dec 2014. https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pico_della_mirandola/giovanni/dignity/

being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God."[13] Man can become as the angels themselves, or he can become as the animals he rules over, or the plants even beneath them, all determinate on his actions on earth. Pico and Dionysius both agree on the effort to become supermundane must include the abandonment of human passions, and the espousing the virtues that God is known to have through Aquinas' language. "Let us emulate their [Seraph, Cherub, Thrones] dignity and glory. And, if we will we shall be inferior to them in nothing."[14] To become more than man means to embody the dignity that is of the one's above us in our standing. If we manage this, according to Pico, we will be as the angels we seek to emulate. Both also note the importance of personal effort as well. God is not pulling man to become more like him, it is man's job to become more "God-like", at least as much as it is possible to be as God. While we can never reach a truly transcendent being, the potential for getting closer is something that both Dionysius and Pico call as possible, but they also note that mundane qualities must be abandoned, and mental pursuits will better man. From Pico, one draws an inspirational note from his writings on man and his potential.

Until the Reformation, western Christianity has maintained a united face. With the Reformation, an important aspect of what will change the face of western Christianity is given the ability to grow: doubt. With Martin Luther's beginning of the Protestant movement, we are given the first cracks in the "fallibility" of God and the Pope. After all, if Luther thought certain aspects of the Pope's judgment were faulty, then couldn't other things be as well? Of course, this process was also applied to Luther's own corrections to theology, and we have the evolution of a full spectrum of splinter religions,

[13] Pico. *Oration.*
[14] Pico. *Oration.*

each believing they have the "correct" processes, especially compared to others. This is a term that Hyman notes as the "pluralization of legitimacy."[15] Each of the players in the time of the Reformation has the correct way, but they cannot be proven correct or incorrect, leaving us with a lot of different voices with a lot of different views.

With the idea of theological doubt entering society, an interesting connection to view is that of Rene Descartes' idea of "cogito ergo sum", or "I think, therefore I am." This concept makes for a major game-changing paradigm. If man only knows that he exists due to his processing of the world around him, and that the world around him only exists to him, then God is not the origin of this world. It is important to note that Descartes did not set out to disprove the Christian God in his theories. Descartes initially set out to find the truth, and God was a part of that truth for Descartes.[16] The paradigm of man being responsible for his own creation leads us to the self of man being more important than belief in a transcendent being.

Jumping forward once more, we look at the concept of God that came about during the 19th century. Ludwig Feuerbach is well known for his work, *The Essence of Christianity* places man in the position given by Descartes two centuries before. Feuerbach's main theory is that God is the outward characteristics of man placed in an external setting. Basically, man externalizes God, instead of it being an internal experience. From *The Essence of Christianity*:

[15] Hyman *Short History of Atheism* 24.
[16] Hyman *History of Atheism* 34.

> Thus above the divine omnipotence stands the higher power of reason; above the nature of God the nature of the understanding, as the criterion of that which is to be affirmed and denied of God, the criterion of the positive and negative.[17]

The reason of man is what is placed above the power of God. Feuerbach with the belief of Descartes of man being the first existing feature, without the need for another being to create him. Feuerbach believes in the importance of reason for reason's sake alone.[18] On the subject of God and religion Feuerbach notes:

> It certainly is the interest of religion that its object should be distinct from man; but it is also, nay, yet more, its interest that this object should have human attributes. That he should be a distinct being concerns his existence only; but that he should be human concerns his essence. If he be of a different nature, how can his existence or nonexistence be of any importance to man? How can he take so profound an interest in an existence in which his own nature has no participation?[19]

What we can draw from this is that man creates God in his own image, something completely counter to the claims of Christianity. There would be no point to a God who differed from man, why would one worship someone who didn't connect with similar morals? Feuerbach places the possibility that God is a product of man, and something that man creates for their own advancement, seen as a goal one can approach, rather than as a spiritually superior being. Here we see a full transition of the fully transcendent God

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[17] Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity.* Translated by Marian Evans. London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill 1881. 38

[18] Feuerbach *Essence of Christianity* 43.

[19] Feuerbach *Essence of Christianity* 44.

from ancient Christianity to a modern definition of God being created and creating its creators.

At this point, we have shown and expressed the idea of two very different perspectives on God in Christianity. From the ancient Christianity, the view of God as transcendent reigns. He is unreachable and unknowable, but his ideals are possible for man to pursue, given the effort and time involved. Descartes and Aquinas, each unintentionally, led to the idea of a personified God, one who has characteristics man can name. Aquinas actually meant to have the exact opposite happen, noting that if a person cannot speak properly of God, they debase and personify him. That is why analogic language is intentionally so general and vague, so as to preserve God and to not impugn upon his glory. Descartes pursuit of truth leads to the importance of the self, and the external being a product of the internal. Finally, with Feuerbach's view of God, we are treated to God being an experience that man creates for himself, in the image of himself. He is another construct of man, holding in abundance the qualities that man holds as virtues.

The product of modern theism is a god that is knowable, and by being knowable, is no longer infallible. As Martin Luther inadvertently created the opportunity for, God can be wrong, and if he can be wrong, then he loses some aspects of his transcendence. From Descartes and Feuerbach, we get a God that is no longer the creator, but the created. This leaves man with the opportunity to "find" God, and the idea of a domesticated, personified being. Feuerbach notes that God takes on the qualities of his projector, leaving us with a big man who is infinitely better than man in certain qualities;

his goodness, his kindness, and whatever categories man chooses for God to have.[20] The product of modern theism

With this distinction of God in two forms, we can now examine Atheism, its origins, and what it is opposed to. During the origins of Christianity, there was no such thing as the modern atheism we know in today's society. A world without immanence was impossible for scholars to imagine at the time. Disputes about gods was one thing, but there was no absence of ALL gods, no matter whom you asked. Eliade would call it an impossibility as well, as a world that is totally withdrawn from any sacred ideas for a person is next to impossible.

As a term, atheism itself was more of a slur on opponents then something one would willingly choose to call themselves. Agnostic was the appropriate term for the time, as it suggested a lack of knowledge regarding God, rather than an outright denial of God Himself.[21] Thomas Huxley believed that the term atheism led to too strong of a side being taken, especially when one was not wholly sure of God.[22] As a self-label, Atheism came into its own during the French Revolution. With the relabeling of churches and gatherings as Temples of Reason and the Cult of Reason seeking pure knowledge, we see a the intellectual culture of France turn toward Atheism. The opposite occurs in America during this time, due to both a lack of state sponsored religion, and the ability to have free worship with one's own choice of denomination made for an environment that welcomes religion as much as France was maintaining an anti-clerical standpoint.[23] Diderot, a French thinker, pursued the quest for truth akin to Descartes, but did not try to leave God

[20] Hyman *History of Atheism* 41.
[21] Hyman *History of Atheism* 11.
[22] Hyman *History of Atheism* 10.
[23] Hyman *Short History of Atheism* 8-9.

within the equation at all, using the methods of Newton and Descartes as tools to find a lack of God in the experience of life. Overall though, Atheism grew as an intellectual phenomenon, and gradually became acceptable as a self-moniker. It is incredibly important to reinforce the ideas that there were no ancient atheists, or that people wanted to be known as atheists. The latter comes with time.

Now that the formation of an intellectual-based Atheism has been described, it is important to look at what Atheism itself actually rejects. It is too easy of an answer to just say God. Looking through the evidence, one can see that Atheism itself rejects the modern God that is shown through Feuerbach's idea of an external God, and two aspects that come from trying to correct for the external God. First is correcting for Feuerbach's idea that God just has amplified qualities of man. The second is the forced mysteriousness of God. By personifying God, we take away that mystery. However, in order to keep God as something beyond man, there is a "willful" blindness that some take, in saying that they know God's qualities, but still do not fully see them. These two theories are both rather vulnerable to the Atheist "attacks" on the idea of a modern God. There is no real opposition to the classic God, as there were no atheists at that time, nor does the concept of truths that are unknown stand opposed to Atheists. The personified God is the target of Atheists, as what cannot be known cannot be denied.

With differing viewpoints, eventually they will come into conflict, especially with a subject so close to people's hearts as religion. It seems at times there is not much room for one to stay on one side of the "war" between Atheism and Christianity. Of course in the modern age, everyone has an opinion, even if it is outside of their own field of experience. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The God Delusion* notes the foolishness of

believing in God, and the superiority of Atheism and his "Einsteinian religion", which is superior to all supernatural beings/gods. Dawkins labels the problems of man, and is set to blaming the Crusades and other cruelties on the shoulders of those who believe in God, establishing Him as a straw-man for the blame of all things man has done. One problem with Dawkins' judgement is that he elevates his "Einsteinian religion" and belief in science to the level of worship that he decries in others. By elevating his own beliefs to such a height, he ends up suffering from the same flaws he spots in other religions, an inability to see the flaws in oneself, leaving an inherent superiority in his own cause. Dawkins argument also is supported by cherry-picked characters that speak loudest in the name of "God".[24] These caricatures, while sure of themselves, hardly understand their own religion, nitpicking choice pieces and using their Lord's name as a shock tactic, not something a follower of God, in the ancient or modern sense, would do. Through this book, we see a degradation of arguments for each side. Christianity in its modern sense is mired by those who are Christian by name only, and Atheism is defended by those who have no place arguing religion without a large amount of research on the field they wish to enter.

What can be drawn from the experience of Christianity and Atheism in modern society? There is little room on the main stage of debate for logic and research when debating one's counterpart on the other side of the aisle. A general search of a religious topic online will get one dragged into a debate that is free floating on misconceptions instead of being anchored by facts and logic. To this end, the most important idea to be drawn from this exercise is that knowledge is the most important thing. If one wishes to

[24] One should examine "The Roots of Morality; Why are We Good?" if you are interested in reading some of the vitriolic examples listed (210-214).

be involved in religion, be it as a believer, defender, or opposed of it, research needs to be done. It is far too easy to be an arrogant Atheist or a conceited Christian, and basing one's arguments on popular sources or a lack of historical experience.

God has underwent quite a change from the unapproachable truth in ancient Christianity, to becoming a personified being that is approachable by man, or even a product of man. As such, Atheism grew as a pursuit of truth into something that becomes a denial of that which can be denied. This subject has fascinated me, and has made me see the subject in a very different way. If one truly wants to understand Christianity, one needs to head back to the ancient primary sources. To see what changes occur, one needs to review the sources from the period. One cannot judge the idea of God by modern Christianity, or the judgements of modern Atheism. The subject field is thousands of years old, and deserves to be treated as such, not just a flame war for each sides sounding points.

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