

# Why Does God Care if I Believe in His Existence?

By Shaun Miller

“Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of  
the Mosaic law, there is not a single one which  
says: You shall believe or not believe. They all  
say: You shall do or not do.”

—Moses Mendelssohn

The typical answer to the titled question is “so that your soul can be saved.” Indeed, part of the fundamental dogma of any Western religious belief is that your belief in the deity’s existence ensures that you will not be doomed to an unfortunate afterlife.<sup>1</sup> How did this come about? Daniel Dennett, in his book *Breaking the Spell*, makes a distinction between believing in God and believing in *belief in God*. What is the difference?

People who believe in God are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things. People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that *belief in God* exists (and who could doubt that?), and they think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered wherever possible: If only *belief in God* were more widespread! One *ought* to believe in God. One ought to *strive* to believe in God. One should be uneasy, apologetic, unfulfilled, one should even feel guilty, if one finds that one just doesn’t believe in God. . . People who believe in belief in God try to get others to believe in God and, whenever they find their own belief in God flagging, do whatever they can to restore it.<sup>2</sup>

This distinction is an excellent example of many people’s attitude toward religious affairs. The belief in belief in God is so strong that a few atheists even encourage it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is oversimplifying it. It takes more than mere belief to ensure a place in heaven. Also, James 2:19 does signify that even the demons believe in God—and they shudder at him. However, the purpose of this paper is to concentrate on the epistemic beliefs of the religious believer rather than the actions. In effect, my concentration is the believer’s belief and its effect on the non-believer.

<sup>2</sup> Dennett, 221. His emphasis.

(How many agnostics or atheists do you know who simply say religion is not for them but may be needed for some people, because it gives them meaning? Or that if someone is demonstrating the fallacies of a religious doctrine, the atheist simply states, “but it works for the religious people?” Or even a few atheists who *wish* they were believers?) Indeed, part of the belief in belief in God already sets up an authority in society: not only does one believe in God, but one *should* believe in God, one should even, if necessary, struggle to believe in God, that the belief in God is a good thing in itself. “Their leaders [leaders of organized religions] have come to realize that the robustness of the institution of religion doesn’t depend on uniformity of *belief* at all; it depends on the uniformity of *professing*.”<sup>3</sup>

The belief in God is not that important anymore, I claim, but rather the belief in belief in God: the professing is more important than the belief. How so? If one asks average Christian believers what the doctrines are, many will profess certain standard statements: there is one God, Jesus is the Son, the soul lives on after the body dies, etc. However, many believers may not truly know the orthodox doctrines of their own religious beliefs. To cite an example, Pojman polls his undergraduate class concerning the Christian view of life after death. The typical reply is that when the body dies, the soul leaves the body and goes to heaven. This, as Pojman points out to his class, is *not* the Christian view but the Platonic one. The correct Christian view is that our bodies will be raised, and when one reaches heaven one receives a *new* body, a glorified body. The disembodied soul does not enter heaven according to Christian doctrine.<sup>4</sup> One could cite similar examples pointing out that lay people may not have a thorough knowledge of

---

<sup>3</sup> Dennett, 224. His emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Pojman, 306.

what their religious beliefs entail, but as long as they have *some* religious belief and show that they have this belief by professing it, then they are accepted as “believers in the community.”

Examining history, one can see many people being ostracized, tormented, or even condemned to death simply because they do not believe.<sup>5</sup> However, these actions stem from people, not directly from God. The belief in belief in God is so strong that it makes the belief in God superfluous. I want to show through two examples how belief in belief in God may have come about: the trial of Socrates, and Camus’ novel *The Stranger*. From these examples, one may see not only that people do believe in God (and one does not need these two examples to see this), but also why people *care* that others believe in God. A possible reply from a believer could be that the belief in God saves you from eternal damnation because it is written in scriptures. To respond to this reply, I will examine the Old and New Testament to see how or why belief in God saves one from eternal damnation. I will relate this with the belief in belief in God.

## **I. The Trial of Socrates**

For most ancient Greeks, the gods were thought of as real: the sun rose every day, the corn grew in the fields, and all seemed to follow a perfectly consistent regularity that had a beauty—and a mind (*nous*)—behind it all. The reason why the sun rose every day was through the work of Apollo, and the Greeks saw the beauty behind it. Centuries went on and common life seemed to show evidence that the gods existed: life was

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, people in the past have been condemned because they have believed *wrongly*. It was heresy, not atheism. However, as time goes on, diversities within a religious group have become more acceptable in the past. Indeed, tolerance among different religions in general has been acceptable. As time goes on, religions in general are accepted—atheism has been concentrated as the wrong belief to have.

organized through rituals which gave one the experience of the particular god. The regularity and order of the universe showed confirmation to the Greeks that the belief in gods was true. It would simply be irrational and absurd to question the existence of the gods. However, various philosophers expressed their doubts.

When a meteorite fell in 467 BCE, it convinced Anaxagoras that the heavenly bodies, including the sun, were just glowing lumps of metal. However, his conclusions were not popular. As Hecht puts it, “new information, new empirical data, led to a direct challenge to the way in which the gods were envisioned. *This new doubt encouraged a new kind of punishment for doubt.*”<sup>6</sup> In 438 BCE, a new law came about to denounce atheism: “denounce those who do not believe in the divine beings or who teach doctrines about things in the sky.”

Socrates enters the foray as questioning Athenian values and questioning various people. Part of his method—the Socratic Method—is constantly to raise questions which cause the Athenians to doubt their cherished beliefs. Socrates asks certain questions such as what is good, what is justice? After a while, one finds out that maybe one does not know what justice and goodness are after all. Therefore, one does not know if what one is doing is good, or if the city is just. Thus, the opponents had to stop Socrates or at least keep him silent. They found his attitude disrespectful, threatening; they preferred loyalty and staying within conventional beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Hecht, 10. My emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> To give an example, in the *Euthyphro* Socrates and Euthyphro are discussing what piety is. At one point, Euthyphro defines piety as “what all the gods love.” However, Socrates raises the point that this definition is ambiguous. Is something pious just because all the gods love it? Or do the gods love it *because* it is pious? Eventually, Socrates and Euthyphro agree that it is the latter: gods love pious things and actions *because* they are pious. This is indeed a revolutionary claim in morality and religion: piety is not defined in terms of the gods, but is instead independent of them. This could be seen as a disruptive form of thought for religion: morality had always been defined in terms *of* religion and the gods. Socrates challenges that. But Euthyphro, a priest who believes he is doing the right thing by indicting his father now may ask

Through Plato's *Apology*, Socrates is defending himself in trial. However, the real charges were unmentionable. Socrates publicly humiliating important politicians has undoubtedly brought more fuel to the ongoing fire. What accusations could the Athenian government charge Socrates with? The charges were not believing in the gods, and corrupting the youth. From here, Meletus—the prosecutor against Socrates—is specific by stating that Socrates is an outright atheist. Why did Meletus do this? The charge was originally that Socrates did not recognize the gods that the state did. But why does Meletus make the leap from this to atheism? The non-recognition of specific gods does not seem to have as much force as atheism. To denounce Socrates' lack of belief in any gods, and to uphold the idea that the sun is stone and the moon is earth—which is what Anaxagoras stated—Meletus persuades the jury that Socrates is guilty of association: since Anaxagoras believed this, and he was an atheist,<sup>8</sup> Socrates must be one too. The Socratic way of thinking is considered evil because it would destroy the traditional order of Athenian society. By getting rid of Socrates, the disorder is gone. No one seems to realize that Socrates' critique of religion is not atheistic, but rather moralistic.<sup>9</sup>

The question arises: suppose Socrates did not go around town questioning the people and lived a quiet life on his own without interfering with anyone. Would he still be charged with atheism? It seems absurd to say yes. So why the charge of atheism?

---

himself, "I, Euthyphro, am a priest and should be an expert at piety, and what I'm doing is a pious thing. But Socrates has made me realize that what I'm doing may not be pious at all, as the gods may not like it. Wow, maybe I don't even know what piety is after all." So if one should please the gods, moral philosophy will tell more than religious practices. Imagine this kind of thinking with everyone that Socrates comes across. Indeed, the youth loved Socrates because they realized that this was a good way to cross-examine and refute their superiors. Based on this new thinking, the priests, politicians, and educators were not wise. If the superiors were not wise, then why should one take them seriously? Remember that the Athenian community's sense of self, sense of identity is inextricably linked to the stable and ordered harmony of the religious practices and beliefs. If Socrates is rejecting the city's religion—as is the charge in Plato's *Apology*—what does this say about the city?

<sup>8</sup> Of course, he was *accused* of atheism, but it is not clear that he actually *was* an atheist.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps in the same vein as Kierkegaard critiqued religion not on atheistic grounds, but on existentialist grounds.

One could not arrest citizens for merely talking to citizens, for humiliating important people, and for questioning the rituals of the society. However, this was seen as a threat. “[I]t is this anger, according to Socrates, that is really behind the older, informal accusations against him. . . . Rather than facing the difficult truth that they [the Athenians] were ignorant, and rather taking responsibility and trying to mitigate their ignorance, the Athenians took the easy way out and claimed that Socrates was a naturalist and a sophist.”<sup>10</sup> Atheism was a cloak, a scapegoat for the real charges: Socrates was simply charged with being disruptive and atheism was the disguise. Thus, atheism is seen as a vice. To be seen or to be known as an atheist is an attribute no one would want. Even as Socrates claims that God has made him into a gadfly, the accusers do not listen and stay with their charges.

Atheism is now seen as unvirtuous. Indeed, one who holds this view is seen as an unvirtuous *person*. But with a thorough look through the *Apology*, one can see that even the accusers did not really believe Socrates was an atheist. “Contemporaries [of Socrates] did not know what to call a thing like that—he questioned their every faith, their every way of life—so they called it atheism.”<sup>11</sup> But in fact he was just annoying, disruptive, against the tradition, and “corrupting the youth.” No one should be allowed to talk to atheists, let alone mingle with them. To be guilty of atheism is already to be seen as a corrupt person. Thus the stage was set. Atheism was considered evil, not in and of it self, however, but because it did not follow societal conventions.

---

<sup>10</sup> May, 40. Her emphasis. To call someone a naturalist was to call someone an atheist. But Socrates refutes both of these charges in the *Apology* (19c – e).

<sup>11</sup> Hecht, 11.

## II. The Trial of Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger*

The reader may find my use of a novel—particularly *this* novel—to answer the question of why one should believe in God a bit odd. After all, the protagonist is an atheist, he commits a crime, and he is executed. However, I find this the most compelling example of the three that I present.

*The Stranger* is about a young man, Meursault, who goes through life without any complaints or passions. He goes through life without any problems or goals, and his actions are based on fulfilling physical pleasures. He attends his mother's funeral, but he is more bothered by the heat and the flies than by her death. He picks up a young woman as a mistress and makes friends with a seedy man named Raymond. Eventually, he kills an Arab—for no apparent reason (although he will later say it was because of the sun)—but he has no remorse or guilt about it (at the same time, this action did not give him pleasure either). Throughout the trial he is condemned, and at the end of the book he is awaiting his execution and looking forward to the “cries of hatred.” There are three moments that I want to bring to light.

First, before the trial, Meursault meets with the magistrate to whom Meursault retells the story of what happened at the scene of the crime. However, there is one detail that puzzles the magistrate: Meursault shot a round, then he later fired four more into the Arab's body. “Why did you pause between the first and the second shot?” asks the magistrate. Meursault does not answer and the magistrate gets fidgety. “Why, why did you shoot a body that was on the ground?” asks the magistrate again. This time, though, Meursault does not know *how* to answer. Here, the reader becomes more involved in the novel. The reader wants to know the answer to the magistrate's question. At this point,

we are agreeing with the magistrate instead of the protagonist of the story and are sympathetic with the magistrate's puzzlement and frustration. Indeed, the magistrate—and we as readers—could be asking a simpler question: why did he fire at all? To say that it was because of the sun and that it was hot simply does not make sense. But it is here that Camus wants to make his point with the notion of what he calls “the Absurd.”

Notice that Meursault has no motive or reason to give to fire the shots, nor to kill at all for that matter. This impels us as readers, along with the magistrate, to embark on a quest to figure out what Meursault is up to. “There must *be* some sort of reason as to why he did it,” we tell ourselves. “Just because the sun was shining and it was hot won’t do. I’ll accept vengeance, hatred toward Arabs, or simply that it was an accident. At least *those* are reasons.” But no, Camus, through Meursault, will not allow us to have those reasons. When we think of absurdities, what else comes to mind? We may think of things such as having no purpose, having no meaning or function, disorder, chaos, being weird, not working properly, ridiculous, senseless, or simply *strange*. The murder was senseless: it had no meaning or purpose behind it and Meursault’s failure to give a good reason makes it appear irrational and strange. Thus, we the readers and the magistrate automatically categorize Meursault as “absurd.”

Two sentences later, the magistrate pulls out a silver crucifix. Here, we see the dichotomy: the crucifix, of course, represents Christianity, and the magistrate pulls this out to fend off Meursault’s absurdity. Thus, the crucifix/Christianity in this context represents anything that is against the absurd: order, rationality, logic, meaning, purpose, coherency, and stability. Indeed, all religions try to find order and meaning in everything. What this sets up, although we may not realize it, is that the readers are



automatically on the logic/order side. This is why we cannot understand Meursault's silence. We do not want to deal with the absurd, and so if there is someone or something that does not fit into the category of logic/order, we simply say that it is absurd. The magistrate cannot see any similarities between himself and Meursault. Indeed, the magistrate mentions that everything makes sense except for the hesitation. However, there may be one thing that could save them both, perhaps even a way to bridge the gap to find commonality: the crucifix. In an interesting twist, it is Meursault who found it hard to follow the Magistrate's reasoning. Hoping for (or perhaps expecting) a yes, the magistrate asks Meursault if he believes in God. Meursault says no. Thus, the bridge is gone. The magistrate finds this impossible because then life would become meaningless: again, the idea of not believing in God and a meaning for life fall into the category of "absurd."

Eventually, the magistrate dismisses Meursault and they really do not talk much anymore. Their discussions become cordial. Why this shift? Again, we do not want to deal with anything we find "absurd". This is how the magistrate deals with Meursault. However, the magistrate still sets up the dichotomy of Christianity vs. Meursault by calling Meursault Monsieur Antichrist. By calling Meursault "Monsieur Antichrist," the magistrate categorizes Meursault in terms of Christianity/order.

Second example, the trial. Trials are a way to demonstrate the standards and objectivity of a society. The trial in *The Stranger* attempts to impose rational order upon society, but fails. The trial is rather absurd, a parody, inefficient. It's like a circus that the press has built up. The point is to teach Meursault how to be moral, to turn Meursault into a human being, but what was Meursault condemned for? The prosecutor states,

“[t]he same man who the day after his mother died was indulging in the most shameful debauchery killed a man for the most trivial of reasons and did so in order to settle an affair of unspeakable vice.”<sup>12</sup> He was *not* condemned for killing a man; he was condemned for not crying at his mother’s funeral. As the prosecutor continues, “I accuse this man of burying his mother with crime in his heart!”<sup>13</sup> This is obviously a form of injustice but Camus is pointing out that the trial itself is absurd.

Camus stated in the preface that “the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn’t play the game. In this he is a stranger to the society in which he lives; he drifts in the margin, in the suburb of private, solitary, sensual life.” What game is Meursault refusing to play? The game of “mother dying” means the next move is that one must cry. Meursault does not follow the rules, so he must be punished for it. This trial was basically to see if Meursault was fit to be in society. That is, he should be condemned to death not because he murdered someone, but because he does not feel depressed. The trial is also an example of trying to impose order on an irrational universe. There is no explanation of Meursault killing the Arab; therefore, everyone else must construct one of their own, even if it’s a false one. By imposing a rational order on logically unrelated events, the authorities make Meursault appear to be a worse character than he is. As the story progresses, the rest of the characters—and possibly the reader—consider Meursault as more and more absurd. Meursault hears positive, negative, and neutral interpretations of his character, and he recognizes that part of his being has no control, because it exists only in the minds of others. All the witnesses discuss the same man, Meursault, but they offer differing interpretations of his character. In each testimony, meaning is constructed

---

<sup>12</sup> Camus, 96. One must also note the context that killing an Arab in 1940’s Algeria is analogous to killing an African-American in the Southern United States in the early 1900’s: it would not be seen as a big deal.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, 96.

exclusively by the witness—Meursault has nothing to do with it. He is being judged by his peers and this judgment has nothing to do with the trial at hand. Indeed, since there is no explanation as to why Meursault shot the Arab, perhaps the only conclusion left is that he is a cold-blooded psychopath that must be disposed of.

Immediately, there is a judgment and this judgment (usually) is negative. When Meursault is judged, “he is forced to see for the first time what his unthinking habits and relations appear to be ‘from the outside.’”<sup>14</sup> I am sensing that this is why theists see the belief in God paramount, and if they happen to meet someone who does not believe, that person will be judged.<sup>15</sup> People desire the world to be a better place and having others share this desire is the best way to reach that goal. To spread that desire of belief and sharing it with the world, then, has a moral imperative. The belief in belief in God has been a normative standard. Thus, the social epistemology of a community cannot be threatened by bringing forth a contrary belief, or an idea that questions the belief. The community’s culture is mostly based on shared belief.<sup>16</sup> So if this belief is questioned, it gives the feeling that it also destroys the community’s whole livelihood, a sense of meaning, a purpose of life. After all, if the core beliefs of the community are threatened, what is there to believe in? If the foundations of the beliefs are gone, what happens to the community? Thus, if people helped promote societal conventions and sanctions, they

---

<sup>14</sup> Solomon, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, atheists judge believers as well. However, because atheists are considered a minority, when they meet a believer, I would think that they will not be shocked or concerned. They may judge the believer for having a false belief according to the atheist, but in the end, the atheist will not be surprised that the average person in a community is a believer. The believer, on the other hand, will expect to meet another believer. And so when the believer finds out that the other person is an atheist, it is an immediate shock which would cause an immediate judgment. The atheist typically does not judge because it does not surprise him to meet believers; the believer will often judge because he is shocked that there is someone that is not someone who follows the community’s standards.

<sup>16</sup> I must thank Christopher Stone for bringing to my attention of St. Augustine’s definition of a community: people united by love of the *same* things.

were seen as good and virtuous. However, whoever hampered or challenged these conventions was seen as bad and perhaps vicious. At any rate they must be suppressed. Religious beliefs are no longer spiritual or intellectual, but rather social and perhaps political.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the third example: the meeting with the chaplain. Part of this meeting also deals with Meursault's view of life. But this view is also strange. His view does not make any logical sense and anything that Meursault states is automatically going to be in the "absurd" category. His view is that there is no God and that life is meaningless which, by the way, would also belong to the "absurd" category.

The chaplain asks Meursault if he believes in God. Meursault casually says no, but the chaplain does not believe him. Accepting religion means accepting an ultimate meaning and a pre-planned purpose in life, but Meursault wants none of that. This defiance against Christianity is not only against religion, but against meaning, purpose, and all systems that try to define rationality of human existence. There are no rewards or punishments, because all we have is this life; in order to take full responsibility and to accept this life, we must face the Absurd and death that leads to nothingness instead of waiting for an abstract concept. Why prepare and wait for a life outside of this one when we should be living our life right now?

What is the Absurd? It is people trying to find meaning and purpose in life when there is none. All religions focus on the afterlife in addition to—or perhaps more so—than this life. This is why Meursault is sent to death: he is sent to death because he is a threat to the social order. He is not, as stated before, "playing the game."

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hecht, 141.

After this realization, Meursault opens himself to the “gentle indifference of the world,” and this makes him happy. Life is absurd, but he accepts that. He neither fears nor looks forward to his death because it is an inevitable situation that everyone must face. We get the feeling that if things happen for no reason, then our actions have no meaning, which disrupts and threatens society. All lives are equally meaningless. Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance, just like us. Yet Meursault does not despair at this fact. Instead, he draws from it a kind of freedom. Without the need for false hope or illusions of order and meaning, Meursault feels free to live a simpler, less burdened life. As soon as Meursault realizes this, he is happy. Why? Because he realizes that since life is meaningless, it does not matter whether we die by execution or by old age; all that happens is that we have lived. Meursault sees that his hope to keep life going has been a burden. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days. Meursault accepts anything that falls under the category “absurd.” It is no wonder that neither the magistrate nor the chaplain can accept his view. They see the world as ordered, logical, and filled with meaning. If there is someone who does not see it, and does not even *want* it, but instead accepts the strange view of a meaningless world, then that person must indeed be strange. This is the reason as to why Meursault fully accepts being an outsider.

Atheism is similar in that the atheist accepts the world without a metaphysical foundation for either meaning or purpose, but perhaps a subjective meaning or purpose. And society sees the world through the eyes of the magistrate or chaplain: if you do not

accept the logical order, if you do not accept an ultimate meaning or absolute purpose in life, if you do not “play our game,” then you will be shunned, ostracized, or perhaps even executed.<sup>18</sup>

After examining a possible account of how the belief in belief in God came about, the believer may have a possible objection: namely that the belief in God does have some significance and not just a profession of a belief. It is to the Old and New Testaments that I now turn.

### **III. The Old and New Testaments**

What do the Scriptures say about believing in God? Let me start with the Old Testament. Although there are instances of the words “believe,” “belief,” and “doubt,” *none* of them are used in the context that one should believe (or not doubt) so that one would not be damned, condemned, burned, or unsaved. In the Old Testament, there are two instances of the word “faith” that have interesting features. I will take “faith” synonymously with “belief,” meaning that one should have faith so that one can be saved. However, the word “faith” in the Old Testament is not used that way.

Deuteronomy 11:13-14 states that one should follow the commandments of God and serve him well. If you do so, then he will give rain for the land so that there will be a good harvest. So faith is not used in a way where one can be saved; it is used to mean obedience. Also in 1 Samuel 12:24, Samuel exhorts to the people to fear God and serve him faithfully because of the good things he has done for everyone. If not, then the

---

<sup>18</sup> Dennet puts it nicely: “The belief that belief in God is so important that it must not be subjected to the risks of disconfirmation or serious criticism has led the devout to ‘save’ their beliefs by making them incomprehensible even to themselves. The result is that even the professors [people who profess, not teachers] don’t really know what they are professing. This makes the goal of either proving or disproving God’s existence a quixotic quest—but also for that very reason not very important” (246).

community will be swept away along with their king. Notice that in these two instances, there is nothing that states one should have faith in order to ensure a spot in a good eternal afterlife. Rather, having faith has to do with a practical, utilitarian scheme: have faith *in order* to get rain. Have faith *in order* to not be swept away. After all, having faith has given me goods, so faith has practical consequences. Indeed, Moses Mendelssohn states that “nowhere does it say: Believe O Israel, and you will be blessed; do not doubt, O Israel, or this or that punishment will befall you.” The Jews’ only criteria was to act, not believe.

When we reach the New Testament, there are more instances of these words.<sup>19</sup> The New Testament takes on a different tone in which there may have been a slow progression from faith *qua* of consequences to faith *qua* as the rule as I will show.

Mark 16:16 may be easy to dismiss. The Gospel concludes at 16:8 but it seems open-ended. This inconclusiveness may have seemed unsatisfactory to later Christian scribes. So Mark has been edited with two different conclusions. Over time, a postresurrection story was appended to the Gospel in order to make it have an ending, and to match it with Luke and Matthew.<sup>20</sup> Thus, if this was put in by later scribes, it makes the authenticity of the ending dubious.

John uses “believe” many times and what makes this interesting is that all of them come from Jesus himself. What makes John different is that it does not match up with

---

<sup>19</sup> The New Testament has 16 instances of “believe” (seven of which are in the Gospel of John), four instances of “faith,” and one instance of “doubt.” The word “believe” is in Mark 16:16, John 3: 15-21, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 8:24; 11:25-27; 12:46; 20:27-31; Acts 2:44; 15:11; 16:31; Romans 3:21-28; 10:9-10; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; and Jude 1:5. “Doubt” is used in James 1:6. Of course there are more instances of these words, but I am only pointing out the specific instances where the words are used in the context that one should believe (or not doubt) so that one would not be damned, condemned, burned, or unsaved. So when I use the words “believe,” “faith,” and “doubt,” I mean it in the context of one should have a belief or faith so that one would not be condemned.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Harris, 144.

the rest of the Gospels. While the Synoptic Gospels concentrate more on Jesus' public discourses, the Gospel of John concentrates more on his private conversations. John's Gospel gives a mythological tinge to Jesus' teachings and makes Jesus much more divine. Some scholars look at this Gospel as not following the historical Jesus but as a "profound meditation on his theological significance."<sup>21</sup> This inclusion of belief made a strong case for its importance. For Judaism, belief was not necessary because there was something more important to their religion: obedience to the laws. For the Greeks and Romans, belief was also not necessary because there was something more important to their religion: practice of rituals and sacrifices. The beliefs were behind the rituals but it was the rituals that were mainly concentrated on. What one believed about these gods was irrelevant. One never condemned someone for not believing. It was the same thing with the Jews. One could condemn them for not practicing, but not beliefs. It was about the practices.

Christianity was completely different for Christianity had neither laws nor established rituals to ground it. "For the first time, belief itself became the central religious duty."<sup>22</sup> Prior to Christianity, there was no emphasis of what one thought. In the ancient world, religion was the practice. This was especially true in the Pagan tradition: focus on occult practices, not on beliefs. However, questions like "do you believe. . . ?" was something totally new. Religions without beliefs or a commitment to a

---

<sup>21</sup> Harris, 209. Harris also notes that the majority of biblical scholars have also suggested that this Gospel does not give a true representation of the historical Jesus.

Asimov has suggested that this does not represent a realistic picture of Jesus, but uses Jesus as a way to present the author's theology. It could have been used, suggests Asimov, as a didactic fiction, analogous to Socrates in Plato's dialogues (952).

<sup>22</sup> Hecht, 169.



belief is totally foreign to the ancient world. It had nothing to do with doctrine. Pagan religions had no doctrines. There was no such thing as orthodoxy or heresy.

Thus, belief became the important characteristic to have for this new religion. Even when Jesus preached that a drastic change was happening in the world, only those who believed could see it. The ending was either going to happen or it was not. Since there was no way to prove this, one could only believe or not believe. Additionally Jesus claimed to perform miracles, which again could only be believed or doubted.<sup>23</sup> Though doubt was accepted in Greek and Jewish traditions, it was not the center of their life. With Christianity, however, “managing one’s doubt, that is, husbanding one’s faith, became the central drama.”<sup>24</sup> Having faith or a belief solidifies membership; they will not dare express doubts or to not be part of the group. It is here that doubts were expressed differently than they were expressed in the past: doubt was broadly used by doubting the basic societal standards. This doubt is best exemplified through the Cynics, Stoics, and the Epicureans. With the advent of Christianity, the rules about doubt changed. Belief became so paramount that doubt was now seen as an unethical attitude. Doubt became confined into a religious context and doubt was seen as having an immoral mental constitution. With this, Christianity became codified and became doctrinal, emphasizing on the doctrines where it mattered what one believed, perhaps even more so than the practices.<sup>25</sup>

Along with this, there were forms of control put in place. In John 11, Jesus has already performed miracles (including raising Lazarus from the dead). In verse 48, the Pharisees have a meeting and their concern is that: “If we let him [Jesus] go on like this,

---

<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to Paul Allen for pointing this out to me.

<sup>24</sup> Hecht, 175.

<sup>25</sup> This may explain why it is easier to say one believes but not be religious in Christianity.

everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” It is interesting that the Pharisees main concern is not about the state of Lazarus, other miracles, or how Jesus can do such things. The concern for the Pharisees is how they can maintain control over their religion. Jesus is out there meddling and people actually believe him. Jesus, therefore, is a troublemaker and must be stopped. Their main concern is not that Jesus is doing something unique or extraordinary, but what the Romans will think of the Pharisees. He must be stopped, *not because he is challenging the current religion*, but because they fear that other people will look at the Pharisees and think to themselves, “well if that is what Judaism is, they have a strange outlook of life.” Jesus, then, must be stopped so that he will not be an embarrassment to the Pharisees.

Indeed, most of these statements in the Gospel of John are Jesus replying to Jews. To put this into context, perhaps Jesus was stating to the Jews that they had to believe in him. To which the Jews would reply, “why should we?” But Jesus reiterates, “you *have* to believe, otherwise you’ll be doomed.” Here is John’s narration in 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” What is interesting is that the opposite of faith or belief is not doubt, but disobedience. One must obey the rules by following the path of Jesus; if one does not do this, they must “endure God’s wrath.” If one disobeys, one is not following the conventions of the faith. The beliefs are emphasized because that is what matters. As long as there are no disruptions, disputes, or trouble, then there are no worries.

Jesus emphasized on the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven to overthrow the evils in the world. When Jesus died, his followers shifted the focus on the Kingdom of

Heaven onto Jesus himself, claiming that the resurrection and death were taken as importance for salvation. They tried to convince all other Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Of course, the Jews around them would have found this completely insane. No one in history has been like this. People who claimed this is criminal because the Messiah for the Jews would have been powerful to overthrow the corruption of the world. But Jesus was actually overthrown himself and crucified. So how could he be the Messiah if he himself was overthrown? The message was changed from a Kingdom on Earth to a Kingdom in Heaven. Jesus' death and resurrection *made him* the Messiah.

One had to accept the fact that Jesus was the way and to have a trusting acceptance in order to be right with God: in other words, faith. Being a Christian no longer meant doing sacrifices. It meant having correct knowledge about God and about his involvement in the world. Paul was really good at convincing people of doing this.

For example, in 1 Corinthians one must accept the message of Christ being the Messiah (not by doing any practices or rituals). People accepted this message and this is what made them different from the Pagans and Jews around them. It is centered on accepting on what God has done rather than doing some act. This is why Paul focuses on accepting what God has done rather than doing these Jewish practices.

In the Letter to Galatians, Paul even tells the people that one does not need to do the Jewish practices (such as circumcision or eating Kosher). Over time, people begin to focus on the facts about God and Jesus rather than doing certain works. The questions became pronounced: is Jesus both human and divine, for example? The Jews and Pagans never really focused on the nature of God. With the paradoxes (such as the Trinity, the Incarnation) became more pronounced and then emphasized over time. "You now must

believe this." The message with this is that if one does not believe, they are a troublemaker, a heretic, or a rabble-rouser and must be stopped.

But this is similar to the charge against Socrates. By simply denying *societal* conventions, one is already doomed. As I will show at the end of this paper, it seems that beliefs have lost their importance and focusing on what the individuals *do* has become more prominent. It just so happens that people blame the troublemakers by claiming them as a non-believer.

There are other passages which state that if one denies Jesus, one can still be forgiven. In Acts 15:11, Peter says: "On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." What Peter is referring in this context is the debate as to whether the Gentiles should be circumcised and follow the Jewish Law to become Christians, or if their simply believing is good enough. Peter's reply is that since God has saved humanity through Jesus, there is no distinction between Gentiles and Jews. Thus, the grace of Jesus is good enough to save all of humanity. Notice that Peter is not saying that one *should* believe or that otherwise one is condemned; he is simply giving a theological belief, as if to say, "this I believe." He pointed out that he had accepted the Gentiles as believers and that there was no need to follow the Mosaic Law in its entirety.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were in jail praying and singing hymns to God when an earthquake came and opened the gates. A jailor noticed and, thinking that he may be in trouble because he was on duty, was ready to kill himself. However, Paul called out, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). The jailor, still trembling, approached them and asked what he could do to be saved. Their reply: "Believe on the

Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). After this the jailor and his family were baptized and they rejoiced in believing in God. But let us put this into context. The jailor’s job was to watch the prisoners, and if any of the prisoners escaped then the jailor would have to suffer the prisoner’s sentence, which usually was death. There was no doubt that prisoners had escaped, so the jailor was worried. His thought of taking his own life so that he would not suffer death at the hands of others was crossing his mind, but then Paul stopped him, saying that it was not necessary. It seems odd that during all this the jailor was concerned about theology and asked about what he could do to be saved. When the jailor asked how he could be saved, he was not asking about religious salvation, he was asking how he could be saved from not doing his job: he was asking how he could be saved from death since he was not doing his job. However, Paul interprets this as how he could be saved *eternally*? Naturally, Paul teaches the jailor Christianity. Perhaps since the jailor was willing to consider anything to be saved, he accepted Christianity and as this religion calmed him down, he indeed accepted it and believed it. It was a simple misinterpretation that may have “saved” the jailor.

2 Thessalonians 2: 3-12 was written in the context of many Christians having been persecuted, and the author<sup>26</sup> writes back stating that those who trouble them will suffer God’s wrath, and that Jesus will overthrow those who disobey the gospel. This is reminiscent of Socrates: he is a troublemaker; therefore he will suffer the wrath of the Athenians. Since Socrates is threatening the rituals, he must be stopped. Similarly, we saw a similar tone with Meursault in part II. The point is that since these heretics are causing the trouble, they will then therefore suffer. But people who do not believe are in trouble *only* because they are troublemakers. There is nothing that states that believers

---

<sup>26</sup> Scholars are split as to whether this is authoritatively from Paul or not.

must believe or else they are condemned *as a rule itself*. Troublemakers are condemned *in the context* of the situation. It is interesting that the scriptures say that nonbelievers will be condemned *only* if they just happen to cause trouble and not simply because they do not believe. Causing trouble, disrupting the status quo, and possibly bringing in new ideas is categorized under atheism. Again following Socrates, perhaps if Jesus believed whatever he wanted, or perhaps had a small group without challenging anyone or causing a public scene, most likely he would not have been condemned. It is the *disruption* that makes the non-believers condemned, not the *lack of belief*.

The whole book of Jude may be easy to dismiss. Almost all biblical scholars consider it a diatribe against heretics.<sup>27</sup> The author does not refute certain arguments or give justifications for the religion; the author uses the argument from fear fallacy to scare heretics, warning them that “their day will come.” It is mainly an invective book making Jude “the least theologically creative book in the New Testament.”<sup>28</sup> Again, it is going back to what I mentioned with 2 Thessalonians: the author gives no reason that non-believers will be condemned unless they are troublemakers. To be fair, it is one of the shortest books in the Bible: only consisting of 25 verses. Perhaps the extreme brevity plays a part in this.

Finally, in Acts 2:44 belief again becomes pragmatic, as was shown in the Old Testament:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).

---

<sup>27</sup> For the moment, I am ignoring what extreme fundamentalists would say on biblical interpretation.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, 386.

The author does not mention that those who believe will be saved, nor does the author say that those who do not believe are condemned. It goes back to what I stated about Socrates and the community that he was disrupting: everyone comes together and they spend their time together and have goodwill and cheer. The group epistemology helps the people survive, thus making the beliefs integral to the community. But along comes Socrates and disrupts the town. The beliefs become so integral to the community's stability that any alternative view is considered a threat. As seen in the previous passage, this could have easily come from a story line before Socrates enters the picture. The passage is simply stating that a group epistemology helps the people survive. Beliefs are the glue that holds society together. They give society the solidarity and cohesion to work together and function properly. Without a common societal belief, things would not get done because the major differences could not work into one's life. Again, beliefs are helpful for survival; not theological survival mind you, but survival to live.

Let us look at how "faith" is used.<sup>29</sup> In Romans, Paul is partially using this letter to set up a theological structure: how can Gentiles become Christians? Do they need to become Jews first? Paul's answer is no. So then how does one bridge the gap? Paul's answer is simple: faith. All one needs is belief and one can become a part of the Christian community. With this said, one may assume that if one does not believe, then one is condemned. However, these scriptures simply say believe in Christ and you will be saved. The scripture does not say believe in Christ *or else*. In other words, Paul is not answering the question of universal salvation; he is only answering the question how

---

<sup>29</sup> They are in Romans 3: 21-28; Romans 4:16; Romans 5: 1-2; and 2 Corinthians 5:7.

Gentiles can become Christians. Indeed, part of the context here is on how Gentiles can become Christians without becoming Jewish first was a very real problem for Paul because if it was hard to enter into a community, then hardly anyone would join the community. Perhaps if the rule had required Gentiles to become strict Jews first before they could become Christians, Christianity may have only been a minority religion or today may be nonexistent. However, there is a solution that is pragmatic and easy: all one needs is faith. From this, belief became paramount to Christianity. No other religion (except Islam) places such a strong emphasis on belief and faith. And since belief became extremely important, “[t]he individual’s sole responsibility was to not step out of the group by rejecting the doctrine.”<sup>30</sup> One would not want to be considered as an outsider to the community, and so one did what everyone else in the community did: say that they believed in Christ. “[U]ntil Paul, there was still the law”<sup>31</sup> and Paul changed the focus from the Law to belief or faith. *Rituals and the laws then changed into belief.* But by doing so, he opened the door for universal salvation through this message and this door could not close.

In 2 Corinthians 5:7, Paul is discussing what the difference is between Christians and non-Christians. His answer is simply that “we walk by faith, not by sight.” It does not give us the imperative to have faith, but mainly a description of what a believer *has*: faith.

As for the word “doubt,” James states that one should ask God if one lacks wisdom, but one must make sure to ask God with sincerity and without doubt, for doubt

---

<sup>30</sup> Hecht, 172. Again, on page 175: “The Greeks and Romans had said that belief was not as important as the *rites* of the local gods; the Jews here said that belief was not as important as following the *laws* of their God, notwithstanding location; the Christians had neither rites and location nor the Law to bind them. The focused instead on belief” (my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Hecht, 183.



just causes your mind to toss and tumble like a wave in the ocean. The Book of James is typically seen not as a letter but as a collection of advice, proverbs, and commentaries. Indeed, the book's main emphasis is that "faith is not that important but 'good works.'" Thus, the purpose of religion is practical: it helps the poor and it keeps one morally aligned. One could conclude therefore, that there is no need for doctrines, creeds, or even rituals. So when James advises to ask without doubt but with belief, this is practical advice, not theological: if one wants to pass a test, study without doubt but believe that you can pass; if one wants to get a good job, have faith in the interview and never doubt yourself; and from Viktor Frankl, if one wants to survive the Holocaust, one must believe in a meaning of life and not doubt it. To believe and not doubt is just good practical common sense.

I mentioned before that denying Jesus may be forgivable. In Luke 12:10, it states: "And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. . . ." However, there is a caveat: "but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." This is again repeated in Mark 3:29. God is out of reach, and Jesus existed many centuries ago, but the Holy Spirit is something that we have within us all the time. The belief becomes pertinent and the doubt becomes extra harsh.

On a side note, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr made a striking similarity between Christians and Socrates: they were both being persecuted as atheists because neither believed in the gods of the state.<sup>32</sup> However the message is clear: doubt equals damnation. Atheism is still the strong characteristic of not following the norm.

---

<sup>32</sup> Of course, they both may have believed in some God (Jesus definitely did), but they did not believe in the God(s) that the status quo provided. However, the difference between them is that Socrates was going against the status quo whereas Jesus' followers were trying to build up a new one, or at least fulfill the old one from the Christian point of view.

## Conclusion

The idea of rejecting atheism is not new. But the reader may find that this may very well apply to other aspects of social life besides theism vs. atheism. We could probably find this in various aspects with liberals vs. conservatives, capitalists vs. communists, or even within religions such as Catholicism vs. Protestantism. That may very well be the case, but I would like to stay with the religious issue in this paper.<sup>33</sup> No matter who or what the person is, the atheist will always be considered “the outsider” whereas even the Catholic will accept the Protestant. Let me illustrate with an example.

Suppose there is a group of religious people. For simplicity, let us say this group consists of religion X.<sup>34</sup> Now through an acquaintance, they meet someone who is Catholic. Suppose that the topic of religion comes up, and everyone volunteers what his/her religion is. After this group of religion X sees the other person as Catholic, I believe they say to themselves, “ok, well we believe in pretty much the same thing, it’s just the details that we disagree on.” The group of religion X will still hang out with the Catholic and establish a close friendly relationship. I would imagine the same thing could happen with any of the sects of the Christian faith.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> For those who would like to do further research on different groups having different epistemologies, I suggest looking at Alison Jaggar’s influential paper “Love and Knowledge: Emotions in Feminist Epistemology” in *Inquiry*, vol. 2, 1989, 151-176.

<sup>34</sup> For simplicity, I am making this religion a generic Christian faith. I do this so as not to bias the paper, nor to pick on a certain religion.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, there are religious people who feel complete antipathy towards those who have even the smallest disagreement. The small differences are the greatest threat. Examples of this are Catholics vs. Protestants in Ireland, or the Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East. Granted that within the religious tradition, there can be fights as shown throughout world history. However, the non-believer gets the brunt of it all. The Catholic and the Protestant may fight, but they agree that the non-believer is the worst. The Sunni and the Shiite may fight, but the non-believer is doomed.

Suppose we change the story and instead of the group of religion X meeting a Catholic, they meet someone who is either Jewish or Muslim. Again, suppose the topic of religion comes up and everyone volunteers what his/her religion is. After this group of religion X sees the other person as Jewish or Muslim, I believe they say to themselves, “now there are major differences between us and this other person. But at least this other person believes in God (perhaps even in the same God, but we just interpret this God differently). There are obviously huge differences in our beliefs, but at least they believe in God.” The group of religion X will still hang out with the Jew or Muslim and establish a close friendly relationship and accept, but not agree, with their point of view. In other words, it is still a friendly relationship.

Now suppose we change the story again. Instead, the group of religion X meets someone who is of the Eastern religious bent, namely a Buddhist, a Confucianist, a Taoist, or a Shintoist. Again, suppose the topic of religion comes up and everyone says what his/her religion is. After this group of religion X sees the other person as a follower of an Eastern religion, I would suspect that this group would not be totally familiar with the ideas and would want this Eastern religious person to expound on what the views and beliefs are. After the group of religion X has a gist of what this Eastern religion consists of, I believe they would say to themselves, “well, there are definitely *huge* differences between us and this other person. This other person does not really speak about an afterlife, sin, or eternal salvation. However, this person at least *has* a religion. So there is *something* that this person agrees with that we do too. This speck of commonality is the thing that makes this person acceptable.” After which, the group of religion X would

fully accept the person of the Eastern religion as part of their circle of acquaintances; perhaps they would even like to learn from this person as well.

Finally, let us change the story one last time. Now this group of religion X meets an atheist. Again, suppose the topic of religion comes up and everyone declares his/her religion. The atheist admits that s/he is an atheist. However, this group of religion X does not want to learn about this view; this group does not want to even *think* about this view. Before this group can get an understanding of what the beliefs consist in, I believe this group would ask themselves, “why would s/he have this belief? Clearly this view is just flat out wrong.” This group sees themselves already with an “us vs. them” mentality. Just as in *The Stranger*, there is the logical vs. absurd. There is no assimilation, no wanting to learn the beliefs because the group already sees the other as someone that they find incommensurable. After this realization, group X is superficially cordial with the atheist but no longer wants anything to do with him/her. Indeed, some people refuse to befriend or even talk to an atheist because “it’s against their religion.”

This example is supposed to demonstrate that the atheist is automatically at odds with the believer. However, why the suspicion? The atheist is automatically on trial and judged for *not* believing. The atheist is seen as absurd, as someone who questions the traditional status quo, or is simply wrong. Even people who do not have a high religiosity will also not accept atheism. One must simply believe, even if one is not really religious.<sup>36</sup> However, religious people nowadays may not *really* believe; they may

---

<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that if one asks a religious person why does God care if I believe in Him, no one gives a straight answer. They are usually perplexed or frustrated. One answer I have received is, “I don’t know. I didn’t make up the rules.” But this all seems to pay lip service to religion without people actually *believing* in it. Dennett is clear on this:

[H]ere is an interesting fact: the transition from folk religion to organized religion is marked by a shift in beliefs from those with very clear, concrete consequences to those with systematically

just profess to believe. Again, it is lip service. Kierkegaard calls these people the “unbelieving believers.” It is mere faith preference rather than actual religious practices that becomes important. Perhaps using an economic analogy, religious folks nowadays are “free riders” of religion: the benefit of claiming a faith no longer has a cost.<sup>37</sup>

Dennett says it best: “What is commonly referred to as ‘religious belief’ or ‘religious conviction’ might less misleadingly be called *religious professing*.” Even though Dennett is using this in the context of Catholic faith, I believe this could apply to all religious beliefs. He continues: “Unlike academic professors, religious professors (not just priests, but all the faithful) may not either understand or believe what they are professing. They are *just* professing, because that is the best they can do, and they are *required* to profess.”<sup>38</sup> But what is basic to this structure is a *statement* of belief. If the belief is not continually professed, this may open the door for new and radical ideas. However, with new ideas comes doubt which brings in loss of solidarity, relatedness with the community, and dissolution of the group. It is belief that keeps the community together, but more specifically, a *profession* of that belief. But what is more interesting is

---

elusive consequences—paying lip service is just about the only way you *can* act on them. If you really believe that the rain god won’t provide rain unless you sacrifice an ox, you sacrifice an ox if you want it to rain. If you really believe that your tribe’s god has made you invulnerable to arrows, you readily run headlong into a swarm of deadly arrows to get at your enemy. If you really believe that your God will save you, you cut the rope. If you really believe that your God is watching you and doesn’t want you to masturbate, you don’t masturbate. (You wouldn’t masturbate with your mother watching you! How on earth could you masturbate with God watching you? Do you *really* believe God is watching you? Perhaps not.) (Dennett, 227, his emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> As an example: try to find devout religious people that really pay tithing, devotes his/her free time on learning about his/her religion, and gets involved in community service. Indeed, I am willing to bet that most “believers” have not read the entire scriptures of their professed religion.

<sup>38</sup> Dennett, 228. His emphasis. Through a personal encounter, I talked to a group of people in the LDS faith. We somehow got on to the topic of original sin, and I stated that they did not have a problem because they did not believe in original sin. They looked at me incredulously and simply stated, “yes we do.” They also talked back to me stating that I should not tell them what *they* believed since it was *their* religion, not mine. However, I told them to recite the Second Article of Faith, which states: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.” After pointing this out to them, they still would not *believe* that original sin is not part of their dogma. They continued *professing* that they believed in original sin.

that *any* profession of that belief will do (as long as it is religious in nature). My next example will illustrate that.

Suppose I meet a random stranger who happens to be a Christian and we introduce ourselves. It is a congenial conversation and nothing suspicious comes up. Now suppose the topic of religion comes up, but in particular, Christianity. The stranger asks me if I am a Christian. Now suppose I say, "I'm not a Christian." I think that the stranger would perhaps be upset, disappointed, disturbed, or experiences a feeling of despair. But no matter what, the stranger's feeling is going to be somewhat negative. Part of this negative feeling, one would suppose, is that the stranger feels sorry for me for not believing, for believers will be saved, and since I do not believe, I will suffer eternal damnation. The stranger "conveniently" has to leave and so we part.

But now let us suppose my answer is different. Suppose I say, "I'm not a Christian, *but* I'm a Buddhist," or "I'm not a Christian, *but* I'm a Muslim," or "I'm not a Christian, *but* I'm Jewish," or "I'm not a Christian, *but* . . ." In this circumstance, the random stranger would simply say, "Oh, ok." Our conversation would continue as normal and there is no negative feeling toward me, and perhaps a friendship would ensue.

But notice that "I'm not a Christian" is true in both circumstances. In both circumstances, one would assume, I will not be saved and will suffer. *Yet*, I am accepted in the religious community in the latter example. What does this show? The religious-epistemic community is accepting as long as the belief is somewhat similar to the rest of the community. It seems that other people seeing me accept God is more important than me actually accepting God. But why is it more important that I am saved in front of other people? If one doubts, not only is one doomed in a theological sense, but more

importantly, one has a major character flaw. In short, *it does not matter what you believe in as long as the belief is religious in nature*. From there, one may be accepted in the religious-epistemic community. It seems that religious *belief* is important *regardless whether God exists or not*.

If one is going to be consistent with one's epistemic prejudice, then religious people should also treat anyone who is not their religion in the same way as the atheist. One should treat the Jew, the Muslim, the Buddhist and other religions with despair, disappointment, or perhaps rage in the same way as one would treat the atheist or doubter. However, this seems extremely intolerant and unpractical. This type of thinking is usually taken to be fundamentalist, non-progressive, restrictive, and ostracizing. All this because of what one believes. The reverse seems to be the only option: accept the atheist as part of the epistemic community for simply having a belief about the world. But this seems like a truism. Under this option, *everyone* would be accepted for simply having a belief. The beliefs would be so watered down where they would not matter anymore. Part of being in an epistemic community is sharing beliefs, but if the definition of an epistemic community is to simply have a belief, anyone can be part of it. It seems that we must get rid of the idea that there is a connection between believing and salvation. Instead, we should focus on the actions of people, not their beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

So the question remains: why does God care if I believe in his existence? The answer is simple: He does not matter. All that matters is how society looks and treats the non-believer and society has two options: conversion or ostracism. It seems as if the believer is more concerned about the outward conformity rather than the inward

---

<sup>39</sup> Or as Thomas Jefferson put it: "But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

commitment:<sup>40</sup> religious folks concentrate not on *what* people believe, but *that* people believe. The *profession* of belief has become a higher priority than the *objects* of belief.

---

<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Charlie Huenemann for pointing this out to me.



## Bibliography

- Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The Old and New Testaments (2 Vol. in One)*. Bismark, ND: Wings, 1988.
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Translated by Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage International, 1988.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.
- Harris, Stephen L. *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2002.
- Hecht, Jennifer Michael. *Doubt: A History*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.
- Holy Bible* (NRSV). Melbourne, Australia: Nelson, 1989.
- May, Hope. *On Socrates*. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999.
- Pojman, Louis P. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2003.
- Solomon, Robert C. "Camus's *L'Étranger* and the Truth." In *From Hegel to Existentialism*. By Robert C. Solomon, 246 – 260. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.