

In a Nutshell

Respectful Atheism: A Commentary



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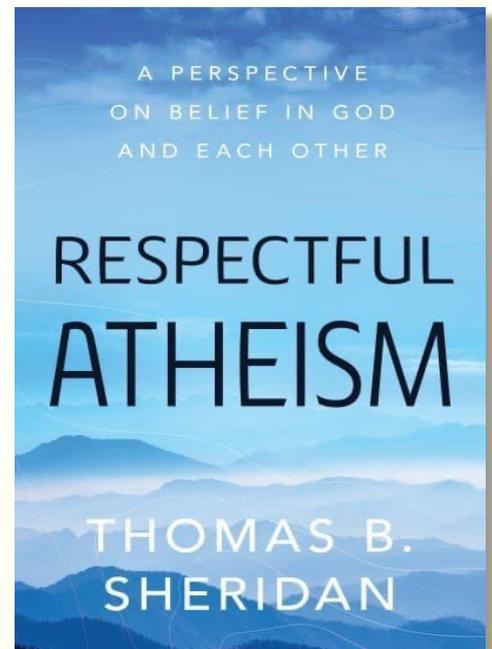
What is meant by respectful atheism?

Atheism, first, is a belief that what most people call God does not exist. More specifically, atheism usually refers to disbelief in the traditional idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving being who observes, cares for each individual person, and occasionally intercedes in our lives. There are, of course, many variants on that traditional conception. A respectful atheist recognizes and appreciates that different people have different beliefs that they have come to because of family, community, education, contemplation or other aspects of their experience. A respectful atheist acknowledges everyone's right to their own beliefs, so long as they do not take destructive action against others who believe differently.

A family member once asked whether my chosen [book title](#) "[Respectful Atheism](#)" was meant to mean "*respectable atheism*". Good question, since throughout history many folks have regarded atheism as being not socially approved, not morally correct, and therefore disrespectful. Related philosophical arguments made by atheists are seen not to respect the long-standing and deeply ingrained traditions of belief in God. In other words, atheism is seen to be disrespectful primarily because it is disrespectful of traditional belief. Tit for tat. This is a serious question that will be dealt with later in the book.

I have found the concept of God to be questionable, and also troubling, and clearly I am not alone. I am troubled not only because the traditional idea of God that most people appear to hold seems so incompatible with science, but also because throughout history God has been the justification for killing and mayhem on a grand scale, and that same tradition is alive and well today. What has also puzzled me is that many people, including many of those who make a profession of religion, refer to God as though they know what or who God is, and imply that

others know what is meant by the term. Maybe I'm being picky, but I never have been so graced. In case you wondered, I have not been unchurched. I was raised in a midwestern Presbyterian church and since marriage have been active in a New England Congregational church. There I was a deacon and served two stints as moderator, the lay leader of the congregation. I have lectured to the World Council of Churches, and in retirement convened a monthly discussion group on the subject of God and religious belief. I can still be an atheist, as I will argue here. I call myself a "*Christian atheist*", as so many of the teachings of Jesus and the Abrahamic traditions do speak to me.



My book [Respectful Atheism](#) ([Rowman Littlefield, 2021](#)) reviews the nature of religious belief, including both ancient and modern arguments for God. It also discusses the nature of science and scientific modeling. Finally, it considers what it means to respect others who have different beliefs, and the nature of compassion, reverence and trust. These are the components that constitute my own outlook on life, and particularly that justify my calling myself an atheist, a Christian atheist if you would allow that, since so much of Jesus teaching still speaks to me.

Atheists throughout history, and especially the “new atheists”, have encountered disrespect and even hostility, at least partly for what is sometimes seen as adamant rejection of what others hold dear. As atheism, or just lack of interest in religion, seems to be growing, traditional believers sometimes feel threatened, or resentful that others do not respect their beliefs.

History shows that primitive peoples utilized myths to explain to themselves things that were totally mysterious. Those myths were their models, their ways of representing truth. Today such myths do not have the denotative attributes of scientific representations that have emerged since the enlightenment. Early peoples worshipped the sun, which was somewhat rational since the sun is our known source of energy and sustainer of life. Some would say mankind has regressed to worship of anthropomorphic entities characterized, for example, by divine revelation and virgin birth.

In the secular world we have a record of accomplishment through use of conscious imagination, scientific experimentation, analysis and modeling. However, most of current society has not evolved very far from clinging to those old beliefs of an omnipotent, omniscient supernatural God “up there” who loves us and hears our prayers. There is evidence that for many people belief in a supernatural God provides happiness and sustains health. Others are content and fare just fine with daily lives in a secular society that respects rationality as a basis for thinking and action. Surely everyone is entitled to his or her own beliefs, whether logical or illogical.

Many would say that religion appears to support a double standard when contrasted to daily intellectual pursuits in the otherwise secular world. Yet we cannot get away from metaphor, myth and forms of connotative language for the things we hold most dear: our feelings, our passions, our loves.

Modern critical thinkers about cosmology and the origins of life, including theologians, scientists and other laity, are rapidly abandoning traditional perspectives in favor of a reverent sense of mystery and an appreciation of evolution. However, in a sense we are right back to the attitude of our primitive ancestors. The theologians ask us to believe in a transcendent God as a means to cope with the mystery. But that seems circular, since by definition a transcendent entity is not amenable to expression in tractable human language. The scientists admit that we just don’t know how it all began.

One philosophical perspective insists that reality can only be known through models based on denotative (scientific) language, and that connotative (metaphorical) language is insufficient. The argument is made that if we can model something denotatively, then we feel that we know that something well enough to communicate it to others unambiguously. Scientific modeling is also important because the effort to model forces us to think hard about what we really believe.

However, most people would agree that there are ways of knowing that are unrelated to what can be dealt with by science. Surely, we “know” our own experiences, many of which are personal and cannot be shared. And some experiences are profound, many would say religious, while others would say transcendent. One can quibble that, as we have done earlier in the book, that it is difficult or impossible to say what transcendent means. Nevertheless, we feel it, and simply say to others “You know what I mean”.

The contrast in the language and considerations of science with those of religion reveals a stark difference in modes of thinking. This is a difference long recognized but continuing to puzzle and alienate people on both sides of the divide. In any case it seems that both modes of thinking are essential to our lives. The mystery aspect of ultimate reality need not be discouraging. As the old saying goes, the more you know the more you know what you don’t know. And that is a non-converging process. We don’t know and don’t have scientific explanation for what seems most important.

We cannot apply science to represent the nature of a supernatural God per se

I conclude that we cannot apply science to represent the nature of a supernatural God *per se*, as there is nothing to model which humans are capable of understanding or talking about. Words like transcendent used by theists are not amenable to human understanding, since by their very meaning they refer to what is beyond ordinary human language. I would make the comparison to the concept of infinity, which is defined as a mathematical limit, beyond comprehension.

Quite apart from understanding the nature of “God” I agree with those who assert that religious practice should not be immune from being tested by efforts at scientific modeling. In contrast, scientific investigations of God *per se* are doomed to failure for reasons discussed in the book. We can and have modeled human beings in their many kinds of activities, so why not religious practices, which are human activities. Efforts at such modeling should penetrate further into why people believe and what (they say) they believe. This will help us examine ourselves and our culture more thoroughly.

Religious institutions can move toward distinguishing and accepting the disparate but essential roles in life of logos and mythos, reasoned discourse in denotative modeling on the one hand, and legitimate subjective feelings expressed through metaphor on the other. Primitive peoples made little distinction between these ways of thinking. Modern religious institutions often do much the same. It would be desirable to make clear which is being assumed.

It would be healthy to admit that the religious tradition of saying man is made in the image of God is to say nothing sensible, because the old God cannot be modeled and there is no clear and understandable image as to God’s constitution or function. Clearly God is really conceived, at least to a great extent, in the image of man: just the reverse of the traditional phrase.

I argue in the book that “God” could become a useful metaphor for what we don’t know and don’t understand. God would be conceived not as a supernatural reality to be worshipped but rather as a truth about our deepest experience and our uncertainty -- to be respected, as a truth about ourselves in relation to the universe. Then God could be “believed” in that sense. Such an orientation would discourage hubris and promote reverence and awe for the wonder and beauty of the natural world. It would encourage people to take responsibility for shaping life rather than depending upon God to do it.

With this perspective the new “believer” can still (metaphorically) “know God” in his or her heart, and “know God” in the beauty of nature, in the faces of children and in the good deeds that people do for other people. Reverence, as described earlier, which has nothing necessarily to do with religion and belief in something supernatural, is highly relevant in this respect. Intellectual honesty for the respectful atheist means admitting to disbelief in the supernatural while embracing metaphor and recognition of the subjective factors in life that are so difficult (but not necessarily impossible) to fit into a scientific framework.

Clearly, knowing the origin of the universe is beyond the capability of science. The impermanence of everything around us makes us wonder where we can find absolutes that might provide meaning for our existence. We need to rethink our religious institutions to promote secular reverence for those things in life here and now that we find most worthy, wonderful, and beautiful. We need new efforts at community participation to promote caring and faith in one another that can be spread to the whole world. That in no way diminishes the role of metaphor for communicating and engaging participation. Bring on the metaphor, and let God be a metaphor for mystery.

Indeed, we need to redefine God to be all of what we don’t understand about our natural surround, a new kind of God that demands our utmost respect for the unknown and for our own ignorance and limitations.

About the author

Thomas B. Sheridan is an American professor of mechanical engineering and applied psychology emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He is a pioneer of robotics and remote control technology. His research interests are in experimentation, modeling, and design of human-machine systems in air, highway and rail transportation, space and undersea robotics, process control, arms control, telemedicine, and virtual reality. Working at MIT, Sheridan developed important concepts concerning human-robot interaction, particularly regarding supervisory control and telepresence. Robotics and telepresence is just one manifestation of his interest the boundary between human and automatic control. His book *Humans and Automation* is a concise summary of the history, issues, and progress in the role of the human and technology in automation.

Professor Sheridan’s book titled ‘*Respectful Atheism A Perspective on Belief in God and Each Other*’ is published by [Rowman Littlefield](#).



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