

So do you believe in God?

I get this question so frequently, I've decided to make a better effort to reply. To be honest, I don't like the question because it presumes we know what those words mean. Here are some responses, touching on more or less serious aspects of the topic.

1. Which god? Do you mean Zeus, Baal, Athena, Shiva, Allah, Jehovah, or some other? If you mean one of those, then no. I am not a theist. I don't believe in an individual being that created and now controls the world.

2. What is belief? Is it a cognitive conclusion that I have reached based on logical consideration of evidence? That would assume I have access to all the information, and I do not. Is it an emotional feeling for something beyond myself? Well, my emotions vary, and some days are hopeful, other days are dark. Emotions are a rocky basis for "belief." Do I make a leap of faith, not knowing anything really, but simply wanting to "believe," and putting stock in a "scripture" to give it support? This is also difficult because knowing about the origins of "scripture," I know the complexity; they were not simply dictated. Also, the strength of my blind faith can also vary and I'm not sure how completely I am supposed to convince myself in order to say I "believe."

3. The concept of "God" usually meant by this question is some sort of being that exists "out there." The god of the Bible is very separate, superior to humans, but anthropomorphic in many ways. Other gods are also considered "out there" and have controlling powers we do not have. A more New Age notion of god includes "the divine" in all of us, and still involves the notion of "spirit" infusing people. There is an assumption in most approaches to spirituality of a kind of "force," which can be called by different names, but which is a thing in a universe of other things. As such, I do not resonate with this idea of "god" as an entity.

4. If I must use the concept at all, I would equate it with the "nature of being." This is close to "ground of being," a phrase coined by John Robinson many years ago in *Honest to God*. For me it involves a perception of existence grounded in the profound science of modern physics. Most ordinary people do not know much about this. Yet, we now know from findings in both relativity theory and quantum physics, that the universe is much more strange and incredible than we ever realized. It calls for massive humility because there are things *no one understands*, yet we now have good reason to question all of our basic assumptions about "reality." The difference is bigger than finding out the world is not flat. We have evidence for questioning our ideas about

matter, linear time, cause and effect, and more. String theorists agree there are eleven dimensions. Yet the general population operates all day every day assuming things that are completely out of date. The knowledge has not reached the masses. This is akin to having everyone act as if the earth is still flat. The issues are intensely profound, with implications for everything we do. The big words for me are “mystery” and “possibility.” Feelings are humility, awe, and excitement. There is no religious description of “god” that matches the grandeur of the universe *as it is* – elusive, ever-changing, impossibly mind-boggling. And this *includes us*. We are part of the fabric; there is no separation. If this is believing in god, then by all means, a hundred times YES! But I’m still not drawn to the language.

A couple of quotes that I find consistent with this:

“How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, ‘This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant’? Instead they say, ‘No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.’ A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.”`

–Carl Sagan

“I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.”

–Albert Einstein

5. Dispensing with the “god” word, it makes a little more sense for me to address “spirituality,” although this word has often meant a focus on other-worldly things. I prefer to describe spirituality as a *way of living* which is here-and-now. These are attributes rather than a definition. They involve feelings and perceptions and experiences which depend on openness. This openness can be chosen and developed. Rather than escaping into a different realm, I think of spirituality in terms of how we live our lives – the choices, the consciousness, the texture of daily life. There are several aspects of this:

Accord. This is the experience of feeling attuned with the rest of existence – a feeling of belonging on earth, being a part of the rest of nature, and in harmony with everything around. When you are in accord, you move along with the vast river of evolutionary change, feeling connected in a fundamental way with the harmony and power of the

whole. You feel as though you are tapping into a rich resource that is beyond you, much larger than yourself. Your inner spring of god-within connects with the vastness of god-beyond, a "deeper power" rather than "higher power," a subterranean aquifer connecting all of life. This produces a sense of trust and safety, a knowledge that you fit, that you have a place.

Awareness. With awareness you are alive and awake, fully experiencing life. This means being totally grounded in the here and now. Your sensory experiences are vivid, and you notice what is happening when it is happening, both around and inside you. You do not reject uncomfortable experiences or deny pain; you are open and embracing of all that life has to offer. This makes it possible for you to enjoy things more intensely and to learn from difficulties. You are not trying to be on some other plane of existence, but are willing and happy to be here now, like a curious child.

Growth. Growth is a natural process. You are not static or inert; you are a changing, growing being. And your experiences can propel you to develop further. As a plant needs the attention of water and food to grow, you need to attend to your needs and consciously make opportunities to learn and change. This aspect of spirituality is active, complementing the more receptive elements of accord and awareness. As humans we are granted the exciting option of making conscious loyal commitments to move in positive directions. Learning will often occur anyway, as a neglected plant will often survive, but informed with a sense of accord and awareness, you can take action on your own spiritual behalf.

Transcendence. There are moments of awe for us in life, those times of being overwhelmed with wonder at beauty, or love, or natural power. At these moments you get clues about the immensity of the cosmos, like pinpricks in the veil around your limited consciousness. You are humbled and thrilled as you gaze at a sunset or a torrential waterfall. A moment of pure love can be ecstatic. Let your vision extend into the night sky, and you may experience a blissful dissolving of your individual ego. Not needing to understand or control, you can experience a sense of total Mystery. These moments are gifts that reflect your spiritual capacity, gifts that become more available as you open to your sense of the ultimate. This is not ultimate in the sense of above or better, but simply beyond your usual mode of consciousness. These are moments of realization knowing that the sense you have of "god" within is not only in contact with but one and the same as the transcendent "god"-beyond. You are a wave in the ocean, individual in a sense but also part of something much bigger – the immensely huge and powerful ocean of existence. You

don't understand and you don't need to understand. All of this is multiverses away from "believing in God."

So even though I would have to say I don't believe in God and I am an atheist in the true definition of the word, ie, not a theist, I obviously feel compelled to question and reclaim the language being used and make this rather inadequate stab at describing my lived experience. It's a bit defensive and that's because the stereotype of the cold, shallow, hedonistic, selfish atheist needs to be challenged. In my opinion, it's all about how we live, and not what we "believe."