



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“Could you please tell me what an Atheist is? My friend and I have discussed this and I think I know what is meant, but his views and mine do not agree. Would you please help?”

This question implies one of the most fundamental questions in the human experience, namely, “Is there a God.” Either man regards himself as the supreme being in the universe or he accepts the idea that there is a super-human Being who is Himself uncaused and is the Creator of all forms of life, both human and animal. I

am perfectly well aware that there may be shades of opinion between these two extreme views, but fundamentally it boils down to the problem as I have stated it and how man views it. The question as put is easily answered; the ramifications of it not nearly so.

Atheism and Agnosticism

Atheism is a complete denial of the claim that there is a God, or that there are gods of any description. This is the direct opposite of Theism (from Theos, which denotes a god or deity) which states the reality of the existence of God and also acknowledges His divinity. W. E. Vine says that Theos was appropriated by the Jews from the polytheism (many gods) of the Greeks and was retained by Christians to denote the one true God. In the Septuagint "Theos" translates the Hebrew words Elohim and Jehovah, the former indicating His power and pre-eminence, the latter His unoriginated, immutable, eternal and self-sustained existence.

Agnosticism leaves open the question as to whether there is a God or not. The agnostic holds that nothing is or is likely to be known of a God or of anything but material phenomena. Atheists say that the question is answered, "There is no God."

Theoretical and Practical Atheism

It is necessary to distinguish between these two. Early Christian history indicates that the Jews and the early Christians were looked upon by the Romans as atheists. It is very obvious that the Jews were intensely theistic, and it is equally obvious that the early Christians believed not only in God but also in Jesus, God's Christ. The reason why the Romans viewed both Jews and Christians as atheists was because they would not acknowledge the Roman gods, including the emperor, as truly divine.

We have already indicated that atheism must have gross materialism as its base, and that this thorough-going materialism will lead to the belief that there is no Being that is worthy of, or indeed deserves to be classed as divine. This attitude is only a step from the Humanistic concept that the universe is fully self-explanatory, and that man does not have, nor does he need, any help from a Holy Being. This, of course, effectively dispenses with prayer and any reliance that man might have upon God. This is theory, and many people accept it.

Practical atheism denies in practice that there is a God. This, perhaps, is the most dangerous type of atheism to contend with, because it states that the question of the existence of God is irrelevant to the meaning of life as lived in the 20th century, and also that God has no part in decisions concerning human existence. It is true to say that in earlier days events which we know to be natural phenomena were attributed by people to some supernatural agency, e.g., eclipses of the sun and moon, storms, lightning, etc., but now people have become disenchanted with the supernatural because they believe that science has explained in scientific terms all that needs to be explained, and if anything remains to be explained then science will explain it in due course; so why do we need a God?

Furthermore, religious principles were once embodied in such spheres of activity as medicine, education, and the arts, but now medicine is explained by the practitioner, education is largely for vocational purposes and is concerned exclusively with the finite, and the arts are seen to be expressive of the modern idiom, again, a scene without God. Secularism is also rife, because it seems that scant consideration is given to life after death.

The great danger in practical atheism is that millions of people may be deeply concerned in their outlook on the universe, regarding with almost reverent awe both the processes of nature and the functioning of the society of which they form a part. Many people hold moral values with deep conviction and try to the best of their ability to live up to them; therein is the danger to spread of the Christian doctrine; secularism and materialism are more deep-rooted than we may think.

IS there a God?

The Psalmist states that the fool has said in his heart, "There is no God," so the atheist, by the very Book that he scorns, has been declared a fool for not acknowledging God. Albert Einstein, generally believed to be the greatest scientist of all time and certainly no fool, is reported to have said, "My religion consists of a humble adoration of the illimitable superior Spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God." One of the first American astronauts to stand on the Moon expressed himself in terms of wonder and awe at what he considered to be the infinite majesty of God in the universe. Many scientists have also told us that the very design and order of the universe bespeaks a supreme creative power. Many people who express themselves in terms of disbelief in God either do not know, or they do not want to acknowledge, that there is a great degree of harmony between science and scripture; Genesis 1 does not stand alone.

This is what the apostle Paul seemed to have in mind when he wrote to the Roman christians, "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." The Psalmist also looks at God's handiwork in creation and cries, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Rom: 1: 19, 20 and Psalm 19: 1). The plain message is that the person who says that there is no God had better look at the universe and find a tenable explanation which displaces God; a very formidable task, I think.

The tragedy of the human spirit of today is that many people are looking exclusively to that which is finite and failing to realise that the infinite has penetrated the finite. God has manifested Himself in the person of His Son, Christ Jesus; does man need any clearer communication than that? Let the christian say to the atheist and the agnostic in the plainest possible terms, "There is a God, and He can be known in the personal experience."