

Questions for Deists, Pantheists, Panentheists, Religious Humanists (and Some Agnostics)

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Where theology is concerned, deists, agnostics, pantheists, panentheists and religious humanists have much more in common with atheists than theists. However, it is not always clear what they believe or why they believe it. For that reason, I have raised several questions for them.

If God exists, where did he/she/it come from? (It is fine to refer to God in this way, because we have pretty much ruled out the hyper-masculine, patriarchal God of the Bible and Qur'an.) Is there any strong evidence to support the extraordinary claim that this God has always existed? If not, what anchors this belief? Would it be faith?

Does this God expect anything from human beings? If so, what are the expectations? Are we supposed to pray? If so, for what or whom should we pray? How could we discover the answer to this question? How can we know for sure that God has answered our prayers? Are we supposed to behave morally? If so, what happens when we come across conflicting notions of morality? What if we try our best but still make the wrong moral choice? Will God punish us in this world and/or the next?

Why is God so excessively mysterious to the point that he/she/it might as well not even exist? Why is God so obsessive about remaining completely hidden? Why is God's existence not as obvious as the existence of gravity or oxygen? If God and the universe are one, why not just speak of the universe, so as to avoid confusion? If not, how is the distinction drawn?

Is this God perfect in any way? If so, in what way(s) is he/she/it perfect? Is there any strong evidence that God is perfect? Is there anything in nature that indicates that God is perfect? If not, what forms the basis of a belief in a perfect God? Would it be merely faith and tradition? If God is not perfect in any way, why would he/she/it be worthy of worship? If God is worthy of worship, how should we worship him/her/it?

What does God do? Did God create the universe via the big bang? It is clear that stars are formed naturally, so there is no reason any more to believe that a human-like God creates stars or planets. But did he/she/it create life? If so, what was the purpose? *Was there a purpose?*

Deists believe that God created the universe and then walked away. But how could that be? Why would he/she/it not want to see how everything turns out, unless he/she/it is omniscient? It is hard to imagine a scientist starting a grand, exciting experiment, and then just walking away without seeing how it turns out. Is there any strong evidence to substantiate the extraordinary claim that God is omniscient?

Does God bless people with talent, opportunities, wealth, good health, good looks, and so on? If so, why are some blessed while others are cursed with poverty, sickness, little or no talent, and so forth? Are the blessings and curses arbitrary? Or does God favor some and abandon or harm others? (After all, many Christians profess to be “blessed and highly favored” by God.) Is there any strong evidence to support the claim that God loves everyone equally?

Do Heaven and Hell exist? Does only Heaven exist? If so, who gets there, why and how? If one has high personal morals but supports racist, sexist, homophobic and classist public policy, will that person make it to Heaven? If there is a Hell, how bad does one have to be to go there?

More importantly, if there is a Heaven, what will it be like? What will the lucky heaven dwellers do to enjoy themselves? Will they be happy there if their loved ones are unable to join them? After all, one of the main reasons so many people look forward to Heaven is to be reunited with their loved ones.

Did God intentionally create diseases and natural disasters such as Hurricane Harvey? Many deists and religious humanists believe that the universe is the result of intelligent design and that humans are marvelous works of God. (And many agnostics do not believe that such a notion is absurd.) However, Susan Jacoby quotes 19th Century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll in her excellent biography, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*:

How beautiful the process of digestion! By what ingenious methods the blood is poisoned so that the cancer shall have food! By what wonderful contrivances the entire system of man is made to pay tribute to his divine and charming cancer!...See how it gradually but surely expands and grows! By what marvelous mechanism it is supplied with long and slender roots that reach out to the most secret nerves of pain for sustenance of life!...Seen through the microscope it is a miracle of order and beauty....Think of the amount of thought it must have required to invent a way by which the life of one man might be given to produce one cancer. Is it possible to look upon it and doubt that there is design in the universe, and that the inventor of this wonderful cancer must be infinitely powerful, ingenious and good? (p. 87,"Interview with Col. Robert Ingersoll, *Truth Seeker*, September 5, 1885.)

This passage might be Ingersoll's greatest contribution to freethought. If cancer is not evidence of intelligent design, why is the human body evidence of intelligent design? And if God did not create cancer, how did it come to be? Can he destroy it? If so, why does he not do so? After all, cancer afflicts not only human beings but other animals and even plants! If God does not want to cure cancer, are we sinning by spending much time and millions of dollars searching for a cure?

These are some questions, especially for those that believe in the God-of-the-gaps, or for agnostics that are somewhat on the fence. I know how traditional theists respond to such questions. But deists, pantheists, panentheists, and religious humanists embrace a vague, amorphous, intelligent God so steeped in mystery that no one really knows anything about him/her/it. Many agnostics seem to believe that it is more probable that God might exist than do atheists. It would be great to get more clarification as to what they truly believe regarding questions such as these.