

Does God believe in atheists?

John Blanchard

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John Blanchard takes great care not only to make everything clear, but also to make it enjoyable, by sharing with us all kinds of interesting information about the great thinkers and scholars in world history. Big ideas, complex thoughts, recondite philosophies and scientific theories are all explained in a way that even a modestly educated reader can understand. When all this comes packaged with a sense of humour and a love for golf (the latter without the former would surely be a grave philosophical aberration), you know that you have a book worth reading!

Most of all, however, this is a book that will challenge you to think and help you to do so. (from the Foreword)

**Professor Sinclair Ferguson,
Dundee, Scotland**

This is Blanchard at his best: immensely thorough, crystal clear, devastating in his logic, compassionate at heart. No stone is left unturned: a brilliant defence of belief in God—and its implications!

**The Rev. Andrew Anderson, B.Sc., B.D.,
Bristol, England**

This book is a remarkable outcome of forty years or so experience of John Blanchard as an evangelist, Bible teacher and writer. His incisive style combined with his ability to draw upon a wide range of sources have resulted in a book in which the overall flow of thought provides an immensely readable and persuasive argument for the classical, biblical, Christian faith.

**Professor J. M. V. Blanshard, M.A., FIFST,
Amersham, Buckinghamshire, England**

John Blanchard not only has the knack of answering a sceptic's questions with precision, clarity and subtle humour, he has the uncanny ability to answer questions before they arise in the sceptic's mind. This book is destined to be a classic on the subject.

**The Rev. Wade Burlison, B.Sc.,
Southern Baptist Convention, USA**

It is highly referenced with all the relevant literature, which is accurate and up to date. It is a book which any Christian would be glad to have on their shelves, not only from its useful reference point of view but because it presents the data in a readable and interesting way.

**Professor Desmond Burrows, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O., M.D., M.R.C.P., FRCP,
Belfast, Northern Ireland**

Anyone reading this volume will immediately see the level of study and research that has gone into its preparation. Its scope and subject matter are of the greatest importance today and it is to be hoped that it will have the impact upon people's thinking that it deserves.

**The Rev. Dr A. T. B. McGowan, B.D., STM, Ph.D.,
Inverness, Scotland**

As a one-time atheist myself, I commend John Blanchard's keen and discerning intellectual and spiritual critique of atheism. No self-respecting atheist should be without it.

**The Rev. Dr Nick Needham, B.D., Ph.D.,
Inverness, Scotland**

I read John Blanchard's chapters on scientific aspects of the subject with pleasure. They are lucidly written and thoroughly researched. He has amassed a great deal of information and presented it in a compelling way. I thoroughly recommend this work to the believer and the sceptic. The reader must react to it.

**Dr J. H. John Peet, B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., FRSC,
Guildford, Surrey, England**

I have the highest regard for John Blanchard. His work is concise and biblically based. It is pertinent, applicable and relevant for Christians in the twenty-first century.

**Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, Ph.D., D.D.,
Pewsey, Wiltshire, England**

A veritable tour de force. Not only does the author fairly and squarely face the doubts and contradictions posed by unbelievers, but he also provides evidence that is both accessible and convincing.

**The Rev. Daniel Webber,
Bangor, Northern Ireland**

John Blanchard's arguments lead to the inevitable conclusion that atheism is both illogical and untenable. Anyone who remains an atheist after reading this volume does so in wilful contradiction of the overwhelming evidence for the existence of God.

**Dr A. J. Monty White, B.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., MRSC,
Bridgend, Wales**

General Foreword to the John Blanchard Classic Series

In an age when too few ministers have upheld the biblical gospel and the life of the mind, Dr John Blanchard has been a leading defender and proclaimer of God's revelation and its coherence. His preaching and writing have helped countless believers formulate and defend a Christian worldview for the work of faithful evangelism. It is my pleasure to commend him for his decades of steadfast ministry, and to express my confidence that his work will continue to benefit God's people for years to come.

Dr R C Sproul

Founder and Chairman of Ligonier Ministries,
President of Ligonier Academy of Biblical and Theological Studies,
President of Reformation Bible College

Dedicated to
Mervyn and Helen Snow
with admiration, gratitude and affection

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Introduction

As we begin to uncover the problems faced by atheists and Agnostics, we need to bear in mind that theists can hardly be said to have everything their own way. Speaking at a conference of religious leaders in 1945, the universally respected scholar and author C. S. Lewis told his audience, ‘It is very difficult to produce arguments at the popular level for the existence of God’¹—and this in spite of the fact that he had by then been a totally convinced believer for almost fourteen years. The contemporary philosopher Os Guinness goes even further and says, ‘God’s existence not only *cannot* be proved, it *should* not be attempted.’²

In his recent book *Explaining Your Faith*, theologian Alister McGrath fine-tunes the point and writes, ‘God’s existence can neither be conclusively proved nor disproved.’³ This seems fair comment, but it depends for its validity on the meaning he attaches to the word ‘conclusively’. It is true only if he means that it is impossible to persuade everybody. Yet to say this is to say nothing; after all, the Flat Earth Society is still in business! George Mavrodes makes the point well: ‘We are, of course, especially interested in whether there is any argument that will prove God’s existence to everyone. Such an argument has apparently not yet been invented ... The invention of such an argument would, of course, be a wonderful thing, just as would be the development of a drug that would cure all diseases. But there is not much reason to believe that either of these is possible.’⁴

Facing any issue in which diametrically opposed views seem

to have both strengths and weaknesses, we need to examine the data with an open mind (or at least a readiness to listen to what both sides are saying) and then come to conclusions based either on what becomes satisfying evidence or, failing such evidence, reasonable probability. In other words, when we can get no clear answer to the question, ‘What does this *prove*?’ we should ask, ‘Where does it *point*?’

God and Gallup

Proposition 1: Only a minority of people are atheists.

Proposition 2: Most people are atheists.

Proposition 3: Nobody is an atheist.

This might seem a decidedly unpromising start, yet a case can be made in favour of each one of these propositions. As we shall soon see, everything hinges on the meanings given to the key words involved.

There may never have been a period in history when opinion polls have been as widely used as at present. From politics to economics, morality to aesthetics, and sports to the arts, random sampling is assumed to give a significant indication of what people as a whole are thinking. Not surprisingly, religion has had a great deal of attention from the clipboard crews and, as far as the existence or non-existence of God is concerned, the results seem to point in the same general direction and to support Proposition 1.

A worldwide poll taken in 1991 put the global figure for atheists at just 4.4%, and although a category labelled ‘other non-religious’ produced a further 16.4%, this still left nearly 80% professing some kind of belief in some kind of god.⁵ These figures tie in fairly accurately with those quoted in *Operation World*, which puts the ‘non-religious/atheist’ total at 970 million, some 20% of the world’s population.⁶

In 1991, the prestigious Barna Report, an annual survey of values and religious views in the United States, found that 74% of adults

interviewed agreed ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ with a statement affirming the existence of ‘only one true God.’⁷ In 1986, average figures in a study of religious activity and belief in ten countries in Western Europe suggested that 75% believed in God, with only 11% believing in ‘no god at all’ and 16% registering as ‘don’t knows.’⁸

In a Marplan Survey taken in the United Kingdom in 1979, around 82% expressed a religious belief of some kind, while 73% specifically said they believed in God.⁹ A Gallup Poll undertaken in Great Britain in 1986 as part of a European Value Systems Study revealed that 76% of those interviewed believed in God,¹⁰ while *Britain Twenty Years On*, a survey taken a year later, gave the figure as 70%,¹¹ the same as that quoted in 1994 by the presenter of a radio programme in the *Believing in Britain* series.¹² In a 1989 review of social attitudes in Britain, 34% claimed to have ‘no religion’, a 3% increase on the 1983 figure.¹³ At the end of 1999, a British survey conducted by Opinion Research Business suggested that 38% were ‘not religious.’¹⁴

White lies ...

Taken at their face value, these statistics seem to put atheists in a relatively insignificant minority, but the fact is that the numbers conceal at least as much as they reveal.

To make the most obvious point first, the surveys beg the all-important question as to what the pollsters had in mind when they used the word ‘God’. Did they mean a personal being, or an impersonal life force; a conscious deity, or cosmic dust; a living entity totally ‘outside’ the universe, or some kind of universal energy woven into its fabric? The difference a clear definition would make to the statistics can easily be illustrated. In the Western European survey, 75% of those polled said they believed in God, but when just one qualification was added—as to whether they believed in ‘a personal God’—the figure dropped dramatically to just 32%.¹⁵ This simple example brings to mind the old saying that there are three kinds of lies—white lies, black lies and statistics. What is certain is that statistics cannot always be taken at face value; we

shall need to dig deeper if we are to get beyond the figures to the facts.

It is already obvious that the place to begin digging is in the field of definitions. The eighteenth-century French philosopher François-Marie Arouet, who wrote under the pen-name of Voltaire, is quoted as saying, 'If any man will reason with me, let us first define our terms.' To talk about 'theism' and 'atheism' is to engage in a dialogue of the deaf until we determine what we mean when we use these words and, as the meaning of the second depends directly on that of the first, we must begin with 'theism'. This is not as simple as it seems. One dictionary defines theism as 'belief in existence of gods or a god',¹⁶ but as the same dictionary's primary definition of 'god' is 'superhuman being worshipped as having power over nature and human fortunes'¹⁷ it is immediately obvious that 'theism' is much too vague a term for us to use in this book. It allows too much scope for wriggling.

Nor is the problem solved by giving 'god' a capital 'G', because, as the British pop singer George Harrison put it in the 1960s, 'When you say the word "God" people are going to curl up and cringe—they all interpret it in a different way.'¹⁸ The American scholar David Elton Trueblood took the same line: 'Nothing is easier than to use the word "God" and mean almost nothing by it. It is easy to be right if we are sufficiently vague ... in what we say.'¹⁹ The influential British theologian John Robinson said much the same thing: 'The word "God" is so slippery and the reality so intangible that many today are questioning whether they have reference to anything that can usefully or meaningfully be talked about at all.'²⁰

This is precisely the kind of problem we face, and vague answers will not help. When responding to particularly difficult questions on BBC Radio's *Brains Trust* some years ago, Professor C. E. M. Joad would often begin, 'It all depends what you mean by ...' We need to get that issue settled before we go any further.

Defining deity

Charles Dodgson, a professor of mathematics at Oxford University

from 1855–1881, used his famous *nom de plume* Lewis Carroll in writing a number of children’s stories that have charmed generations of readers ever since. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass* one of his best-known characters gets involved in verbal gymnastics:

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be the master—that’s all.’²¹

That kind of delightful dottiness is fine for children’s fiction, but it will hardly do when we are discussing the most important question human beings could ever ask. It may therefore be helpful if at this point I seek to establish a bench-mark by setting out what I mean when I use the word ‘God’ from here on. Put in a nutshell, I mean ‘a unique, personal, plural, spiritual, eternally self-existent, transcendent, immanent, omniscient, immutable, holy, loving Being, the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe and the Judge of all mankind’. Let me elaborate a little.

- By ‘*unique*’ I mean that there is only one God and that all other objects or ideas given that name are figments of misled imagination.
- By ‘*personal*’ I mean that God is not a ‘thing’ or ‘power’, influence or energy, but that he lives, thinks, feels and acts.
- By ‘*plural*’ I mean that there are distinguishable persons within a single Godhead.
- By ‘*spiritual*’ I mean that God has no physical attributes or dimensions, that he does not have a body, or any characteristics that can be defined in terms of size or shape.