

Atheism is Global Atheism

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Abstract: *Accepting Diller’s challenge to justify “global atheism,” despite its supposed crushing burden of knowledge, this paper argues that the global atheist bears no extraordinary burden. In fact, all atheism is global atheism, as an atheist lacks any and all god-beliefs; while a local theist, who accepts one of the myriad god-beliefs over all others, has a special burden to account for that choice. Surveying the diversity of god-concepts across religions and how atheists dismiss and discard them, this paper provides an inductive and philosophical foundation of global atheism—as well as illustrating that local theisms are more prone to blending and overlapping than allowed in Diller’s scheme.*

Keywords: Atheism, Theism, God(s), Comparative Religion, Absence of Belief

“Do you believe in God?”
 “No.”
 “Then you are an atheist?”
 “Yes, I am.”
 “Do you believe in Allah?”
 “No.”
 “Do you believe in Zeus?”
 “No.”
 “Do you believe in Odin?”
 “No.”
 “Do you believe in Vishnu?”
 “No matter what god you name, the answer is going to be no.”

A colleague of mine likes to repeat something that his pastor supposedly told his flock. Given the opportunity to address an atheist, the pastor would say, “Tell me what god you disbelieve in, and I probably disbelieve in him too.” My colleague finds this retort clever, as no doubt did the pastor and his audience (I wonder if the preacher has ever actually tried this tactic on an atheist, and how the atheist responded). But it profoundly

misunderstands both theism and atheism and explains much of the confusion among philosophers of religion about religious belief and non-belief.

To clarify some of this muddle, Jeanine Diller introduces the interesting distinction between *local* and *global* theism and atheism. The obvious problem, as our hypothetical interlocutors at the opening of this essay illustrate, is that there are lots of theisms, often if not always highly incompatible with each other. Accordingly, Diller understands, in a way that our friend the pastor does not, that “theism cannot consistently affirm God on all notions”—or it might be better to say that a theist can only intelligibly believe in one of the available god-concepts at a time, which is her definition of “local theism.”¹ In contrast, she contends, “atheism is consistent in both its global form and its local form, since... it is consistent to deny that there is a god on one, some, or all notions of God.”² Strangely, then, she concludes that “currently all atheism should be local,” insisting that no scholar (at least no “philosopher”) has avowed global atheism and that aspiring global atheists confront an unbearable burden of “denying all local notions” of god(s) while “theists need affirm only one”³ and/or of mounting arguments that debunk all god(s), not just the local god(s).⁴

In this essay, I accept Diller’s challenge. As for the assertion that there are no avowed global atheists, *hier stehe ich*, as Martin Luther allegedly declared. More importantly, I argue that *all* atheism is global atheism, that atheism is of necessity global atheism, since an atheist is without any of the local theisms; otherwise, she is a theist. That is an empirical fact but can also be supported with logical principles. In making my case, I will not be examining the particular reasons that individual atheists give for eschewing god(s), which may be evidential, emotional, or other, nor will I be assessing the justification of those reasons. I merely note that there are people—a lot of people these days—who believe in no god(s). This analysis will allow us to better comprehend atheism, theism(s), religion(s), and god(s). Ironically, it will also demonstrate that, contrary to Diller’s other claim, not all theisms are entirely local, and individuals can and do often entertain or believe in multiple local gods without suffering the inherent incompatibility of those beings.

¹ Jeanine Diller, “Global and Local Atheisms,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79, no. 1 (2016): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-015-9550-1>.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

proclaim their devotion to the Goddess, who is the “living being” also known as the earth: “Everything around us is alive and part of her living body—animals and plants, of course, but also some things that may not ordinarily seem to be alive, such as rocks, mountains, streams, rivers, stars, and clouds.”³⁶ No purely immaterial or spiritual being is she. “We also believe,” they explained, “in many different Goddesses and Gods, whom we call by many different names,” a few of which mentioned in the book include the Blue God, the Green Man, the Horned God, the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, Birgit the Irish goddess of the holy well and sacred flame, the goddess Cerridwen, Eostar or Ostara the Germanic goddess of fertility, Demeter the Greek goddess of growing things, the Ashanti gods Nyama and Nyakpon, and more.³⁷ Are these independent gods or avatars of the Goddess? With this question, we are back to *kwoth*.

What this all proves is that local theisms are not so incompatible and unmixable after all. In fact, religions are composite phenomena, made of various and sundry elements including gods, spirit-being spirit-forces, and any combination of building blocks such as prayer, ritual, myth, and so on; gods themselves are composite concepts, constituted of discrete bits often from different traditions. And religions can easily integrate and agglutinate “non-religious” elements like race, nationalism, science, science fiction, and popular culture. And all of these religious and divine composites evolve over time.

Therefore, we may need a category between Diller’s local and global theism, something like multi-theism. The conventional local theisms are nothing more than the current states of this compounding and evolving process, and ersatz mergers like the Goddess tradition are tomorrow’s local theisms, just as mainstream Christianity (or *Christianities*) and its god are products of yesterday’s ersatz mergers.

³⁶ Starhawk, Diane Baker, and Anne Hill, *Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

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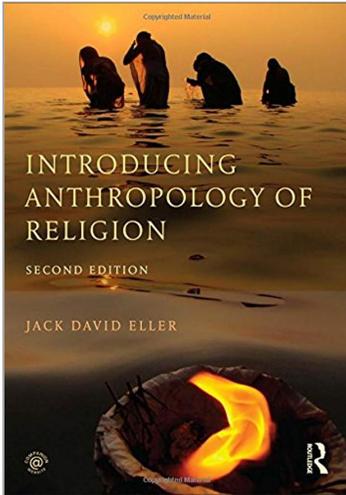
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