

# Introduction: A Brief History of Theism and Its Alternatives

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This Special Edition includes articles discussing the many alternatives to the various forms of theism found among the majority of religious and some philosophical traditions.

## 1. A Brief History of Theism

The term theism derives from the Greek word for God, *theos*. Ralph Cudworth is credited with coining the term in the 17th century to refer to a belief in God as a conscious mind who was the creator of the universe and is eternal. My usage differs from Cudworth's in that I do not limit 'theism' to monotheistic religions or gods who create or are eternal. I use the term for any attribution of some human-like agency to a deity, whether a god, a goddess or a male or female spirit. That is, to describe belief in any divine entity that is imaged to be somehow analogous to a human: to have thoughts akin to a human's, to have the power of motion or to have human-like emotions such as anger, love or jealousy. And in some mythologies, even to have sexual longings, affairs and children.

There are many instances of human-like behavior being attributed to animal spirits and forces of nature. Diseases such as toothache, fever and so on were once thought to be the work of evil spirits, while good spirits may help humans by countering evil spirits. Many cultures associate spirits with animals, especially ferocious animals such as bears, eagles or large felines. Clever animals, such as a raven or a fox, have also inspired a spirit's status. In one of the many ancient stories explaining how dry land emerged from a primordial ocean, some animal capable of diving is thought to have played a key role in creation. The 'earth-diving' turtle found in Asian and North American indigenous stories is an example.

Animal spirits are often associated with a god or goddess. Some well-known examples are Athena's owl, Shiva's bull Nandi or Lakshmi's elephant and owl. Each of Hinduism's major gods and goddesses has an associated animal understood as their means of movement, their vehicle (*vahana*). Strangely, a mouse is the vehicle of the large, elephant-headed god Ganesh.

The high god was associated with a bull in the ancient Near East and many other regions. In ancient Crete, worshippers passed between two huge bull horns. At Cathalhoyuk in ancient Anatolia, the rooms that appear to have served as temples display bucrania, the skull and horns of a bull. Associating god and a bull is found even among ancient Hebrews, who normally disdained images of God. During the Exodus, Aaron and the other Hebrews thought it appropriate to make an image of a golden calf to represent their god—only to be severely rejected by Moses. Later, when the northern kingdom (Israel) rebelled against the southern kingdom (Judah), King Jeroboam of Israel did not want his people to go to the temple in Jerusalem, so he built new temples at Dan and Bethel. He placed a golden bull calf in each of those temples, which he associated with Yahweh.

In the ancient Near East and beyond, some variety of feline was typically the animal associated with an important goddess. Baset in Egypt is an example. At Cathalhoyuk, James Mallaart unearthed several examples depicting the close association between a goddess and a large feline. In one small statue, the goddess is seated on a throne with a large feline on either side. Mallaart found a relief carving of a goddess figure giving



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birth to a cat on one wall. There are many examples in ancient Egypt of the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet. In Hinduism, the goddess Parvati is often depicted as sitting on a lion, as is Durga.

Snakes are sometimes thought to have divine powers as well. Due to snakes' ability to shed and renew their skin, some ancients believed snakes to be immortal—unless killed. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there is a belief in supernatural cobras (nagas) that live under the earth. They are thought to have special wisdom and are associated with jewels and pools of water.

Because gods and goddesses were not visible, ancient people imagined that they lived somewhere up high, either above the clouds or on a mountain. In Greek thought, the deities were said to dwell on Mount Olympus. In Hinduism, the god Shiva dwells on Mount Kailash. One of the early names of God in the Hebrew Bible is El Shaddai, likely meaning God of the Mountain(s), but that meaning is contested. In any case, the association of mountains and deities or spirits is widespread. Moses encounters God via a burning bush on a mountain. Later, while wandering in the wilderness, he withdraws to a high place to pitch his tent to get revelation from God.

The highest-ranking god is often seen as the creator, like an earthly king who makes and enforces laws. Like a king, God was to be feared as well as respected.

## 2. God of the Gaps

The way that humans understand God has evolved through time. Whenever humans could not understand something in nature, they typically attributed it to a god or evil spirits if it was bad. For example, when humans did not understand the cause of volcanoes, many believed in a volcano god who got very angry occasionally. Just as angry humans can be appeased by gifts or special attention, a great sacrifice was needed to appease the volcano god. When humans could not understand how the sun and moon moved across the sky, they imagined them as gods or objects carried by chariots of the gods. When people marveled at the order in the world, they came to believe in a mastermind. When they did not understand how birds could fly, they believed that God, or angels, held them up. When lightning storms struck, humans explained it by believing in a storm god. When wise observers tracked the strange movements of the planets, the 'travelers', across the night sky, they believed the planets were gods, such as Venus and Mars, or Hindu planetary gods, such as Brihaspati (Jupiter) or Shani (Saturn).

This longstanding tendency to credit gods as the explanation for the gaps in human knowledge evolved as human understanding improved. When there no longer was a gap in the human understanding of volcanoes or storms, the belief in the volcano or storm god faded away, only to be replaced by the god of another gap in human knowledge.

Has human knowledge, based in modern science, developed to the point that there are no longer gaps for a god to fill? Science now has ready explanations for volcanoes, storms, diseases, birds' flight, the sun's movement, the moon, planets, stars and even the universe's evolution. At least, many think so. This is partly why many now turn to various approaches to cultivating a 'spiritual' dimension, such as yoga, Buddhist or Hindu style meditation, Wicca or drugs. They may have some identification with a church, synagogue, mosque or temple. Still, they may only go there for major holidays or ritual occasions such as weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies or funerals. This is why there has been a dramatic rise in 'Nones' -- those whose religious self-identity is 'agnostic,' 'atheist' or 'nothing in particular'. A Pew Research Center survey found that almost one-third of Americans fall into the religious 'none' profile. ("About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated" <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated>, accessed on 13 July 2023).

## 3. A Brief History of Alternatives to Theism

Other views of God have been largely overlooked. These views are also very ancient and appear as minority views among most of the world's religions or spiritualities. This

Special Edition is about some of those other views of god, such as where god is understood as the deep energy of the universe, or a cosmic spirit in all things, or in some other way. One of these alternate views might be a spiritual understanding that some moderns can embrace despite what we now know about volcanos, the age of the earth and the absence of a Zeus figure ‘up there’ somewhere on a mountain or in space.

#### 4. A God Who Is beyond Attributes or “Names”

In our modern, more secular culture, there is a disconnect between one’s name and one’s essence. Parents choose a name that has little or no connection to the essence or characteristics of the child. Traditionally, especially in religious usage, the concept *name* takes on some critical roles. In the traditional view, many attributes are ascribed to God, such as Creator, Judge, Ruler, Lawgiver, Truth, Great Being, Father or King. God may be described as wrathful or loving, wise, full of light, magnificent, all-powerful, all-knowing or great. These are just a few of the more than one hundred attributes or characteristics humans ascribe to God. Many religious traditions refer to such diving attributes as the “names” of God. For example, Islam has a list of 99 such names of God. This reflects an older use of the term in which a name refers to the essence of something. So, for instance, when a Christian prays ‘In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’, it refers to the essence of the divine rather than a mere name. When Japanese Pure Land Buddhists chant *Namu Amida Butsu*, “in the name (namu) of Amida Buddha,” they mean to be putting their trust in the powerful ‘essence’ of Amida Buddha. All but one of the chapters (surahs) of the Quran begin with the invocation: “In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate”. This Quranic invocation is called by its first word, *Bismillah*, which means ‘in the name of Allah’.

Several religious traditions have mantras—sacred words to be chanted—composed of only the various names of their god. For example, the chant made famous in the West by the International Society of Krishna Consciousness has these four stanzas:

1. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna
2. Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
3. Hare Rama, Hare Rama
4. Rama Rama, Hare Hare

The words in this sixteen-word chant comprise just three names, each a variant name of the same god. *Hare* is a vocative form of Hari, one of the names of the god Vishnu. *Rama* is the name of the prince, the central figure of the epic known as Ramayana (Rama-story). Rama is considered one of the incarnations of Vishnu and, therefore, is another name for Vishnu. *Krishna* is considered one of the incarnations of Vishnu by most Hindus, but the Hindus who chant this mantra understand Krishna as the name of the supreme godhead.

#### 5. The Nirguna God of the Hindu Philosopher Shankara

The famous Hindu philosopher Shankara taught and wrote, most likely in the 8th century. Shankara distinguished a god with attributes and one without attributes. In this context, the Sanskrit word for attributes is *guna*, which is similar to the names or ‘qualities’ of the divine.

Shankara called the god with attributes *saguna brahman*, meaning ‘Brahman with guna’. Most Hindus then and now believe in this kind of god. Most Hindus still think of their gods and goddesses as having somewhat human-like characteristics. In contrast to these *saguna* concepts, Shankara wrote about a higher concept of a god beyond attributes (*nirgunas*). This *Nirguna* Brahman is not confined to our human concepts such as Father, Creator, Lord, Almighty, Truth, Goodness or even Eternal. The Nirguna Brahman is the ultimate god, beyond direct knowledge. The spiritual goal is to unite the soul, *atman*, with the Nirguna Brahman. Shankara’s Nirguna Brahman is the essence, or energy, of the universe. It is what I call the Energy God.

## 6. The Energy God Is beyond Human Understanding

Shankara's claim that the ultimate god is without characteristics or names is his way of saying that the ultimate god is beyond human understanding. He is not alone in taking that seemingly extreme position. Many mystics from various religious traditions and centuries have made the same point in their way. In fact, it has become a running joke among scholars of mysticism to note that most mystics begin their book or treatise with the disclaimer that words can never express their experience of god. Then, they go on to write pages and pages of words about their experience of god! We understand, however. It is like when our little brother or sister asks what it is like to be in love. We start by saying that we cannot put it into words, but then we try to put it into words. The late poet Ogden Nash penned this limerick, "*Whatever the mind comes at, God is not that*".

## 7. Laozi's Concept of Dao as the Mother of All Things

According to the legend, Laozi seems to have been rather grumpy about the state of public affairs in his day. He quit his archivist job and left China, riding west on his water buffalo. As luck would have it, the guard happened to be one of his student admirers as he came to the checkpoint at the border. That guard was distressed that their Old Master was leaving them. He pointed out to Laozi that he had often promised to put his teachings into writing someday. Trapped by his own promise, the Old Master agreed to put his thoughts in writing. He wrote down his teachings in the form of poetic and cryptic verses. The resulting book is known in the West as the *Dao di Jing*, or *Tao De Ching* in another way of transliterating Chinese.

One way to translate the opening lines of the *Dao De Jing* attributed to Laozi is "The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name". (Jeff Pepper and Xiao Hui Wang, *Dao De Jing in Clear English*, Emagin8 Press, Verona, Pa, 2018, 14). The second line relates directly to the claim discussed by Shankara and others that God is beyond names. If we cannot conceptualize something, we cannot name it.

The Dao functions poetically, like a creator god. Yet this is nothing like the usual creator god. Dao does not use words or angels as the actors in creation. Dao does not create like a potter, watchmaker or architect. Dao does not need the help of earth-diving turtles or alien space creatures.

## 8. The Pre-Socratics' Search for the First Principle (*Arche*)

The early Greek philosophers before Socrates thought deeply about the *arche* as a first cause or first principle, meaning that from which everything else derives. As philosophers rather than theologians, they used reason rather than stories about god. In the 5th century BCE, the standard view was that the world consisted of four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water. So, they tended to start with those four and then ask which of those was primary, the basic element.

Thales of Miletus sought a rational, rather than mythic, explanation for volcanos. The anger of a god did not cause them but was likely caused by the movement of the earth, which he thought floated on the water. In short, he came close to explaining what we now know as plate tectonics. When Thales turned his attention to the question of the first principle (*arche*), or original cause, he again reasoned that water was the first principle. His first cause might be understood as a fluid underlying all nature.

Anaximander talked about an undifferentiated, primal substance that underlies the four elements. This undifferentiated primal substance cannot be described. Like the Nirguna Brahman of Shankara, it is without qualities. Anaximander's idea was that a primal form of air is the first principle. This primal air then differentiates into the elements we perceive.

Heraclitus' first principle was fire, some primordial source of heat and energy. He also taught that all things come to pass from *logos*, 'word.' A similar view later shows up in

the prologue to the Gospel of John in the New Testament. John equates logos, the means through which God creates, with Jesus.

Xenophanes severely attacked the traditional concept of gods with human-like characteristics. He suggested that if animals could speak and draw, they would describe and paint pictures of gods looking like those animals. He seems to have believed in a supreme god while stressing that the traditional views of a god were wrong.

### 9. Guru Nanak's Concept of the Formless One

Having been born in the Punjab area in Northwest India in 1469, Nanak lived in a region with many Hindus as well as Muslims. The Muslims stressed the oneness of god and denounced the use of idols. Hindus, in sharp contrast, worshipped many gods and made great use of images of those gods in their temples and homes. Guru Nanak avoided using any of the Hindu god names or the Arabic term Allah. Instead, Nanak referred to god as Akal Purakh, the One Beyond Time. Or as Niranka, the Formless. Although Guru Nanak promoted a very personal relationship with Akal Purakh, he insisted that god is never incarnated and is self-existent.

### 10. Christian Mystic Jakob Boehme's Concept of the Ungrounded

Jakob Boehme was a shoemaker and Lutheran Christian who lived in Germany. In 1600 Boehme had his life-changing mystical experience at the breakfast table as the early morning sun reflected off pewterware into his eyes. This burst of focused sunlight sparked a deep mystic experience. He felt like one with God and the universe. Later, other such visions led him to a theological view that is typical of mystics, whether Christian or other. God is infused in the universe.

One term that some German Christian mystics used for their understanding of God was *Urgrund*, the 'Original Ground.' The concept was that God is the underlying ground of being. Other German mystics used the term *Ungrund*, the 'Ungrounded.' Although 'Original Ground' and 'Ungrounded' may initially seem quite different—is God the ground or the ungrounded?—the two terms convey the same concept of God as the first cause. The energy basis underlies everything and everyone.

### 11. Christian Theologian Paul Tillich on the Ground of Being

The 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich conceived of God in a way very similar to the Christian mystics. Tillich contrasts the traditional God with the Ground of Being:

The name of the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of our being is God. That depth is what the word God means. (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of Foundations*, Crossreach Publications, chapter 7, kindle edition). Tillich took great steps in bringing the mystic view of God as *Urgrund* or *Ungrund* into mainstream Christian theology.

### 12. Creating Versus Energizing

In contrast to theists, those who view God in a non-theistic way often understand creation as a flow of cosmic energy into a worldly form. The Tree of Life symbolizes this in Kabbalah and the alchemical worldview. As Boehme writes, "Now when God was to create the World, and all things therein, he had no other matter to make it of but his own Being, out of himself. But now, God is a Spirit that is incomprehensible, which has neither Beginning nor End, and his Greatness and Depth is all." (Jakob Boehme 2016. *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*. Kraus House, 1016. 1.)

The alternatives to theism do not form a unified spiritual worldview, but they call our attention to the long and diverse history of views that do not attribute human traits to views of the divine.

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