



THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Who God Is and Why He Matters

STUDY GUIDE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Lesson I:</i>	Atheism and What We Mean by “God”	1
<i>Lesson II:</i>	The Paths to God	17
<i>Lesson III:</i>	The Divine Attributes	33
<i>Lesson IV:</i>	Providence and the Problem of Evil	49
<i>Lesson V:</i>	Exploring the Trinity	65
<i>Lesson VI:</i>	The God Who Is Love	81
 <i>BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION</i>		 97
<i>Father Robert Barron</i>		
<i>Trent Horn</i>		
 <i>ENDNOTES & GLOSSARY</i>		 99



ATHEISM AND WHAT WE MEAN BY “GOD”

LESSON ONE OUTLINE

- I. INTRODUCTION
 - A. Atheism and September 11

- II. ATHEISM
 - A. Definition of Atheism
 - B. Strong vs. Weak Atheists
 - C. Agnosticism

- III. ARE WE ALL ATHEISTS?
 - A. St. Anselm’s Definition of God
 - B. False Understandings of God
 - C. “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”

- IV. WHAT IS GOD?
 - A. Essence and Existence
 - B. God as Being Itself

- V. GOD MADE IN MAN’S IMAGE
 - A. Ludwig Feuerbach
 - B. Argument from Desire

- VI. ATHEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM
 - A. Karl Marx
 - B. Jean Paul Sartre
 - C. God and Freedom
 - D. Objective Goodness



LESSON ONE

ATHEISM AND WHAT WE MEAN BY “GOD”

Prior to September 11, 2001, atheists typically considered religion to be a generally harmless fiction, save for the actions of a few violent extremists. But after the events of that terrible day, many atheists came to believe that religion itself was dangerous since it could, allegedly, motivate good people to do terrible things in the name of blind faith. The 9/11 attacks encouraged atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins to write their bestselling diatribes against religion.

Dawkins hopefully opines in his 2006 book *The God Delusion*, “Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11 If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”¹

But as Proverbs 18:17 says, “He who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” The goal of these lessons is to equip you to better understand not only the arguments of atheists, but also the loving, triune God of the Catholic faith, and to share him with others in our skeptical world.



ATHEISM

Atheism comes from the Greek word for “God” (*theos*) and the Greek word for “without” (*a*). Hence, an atheist is someone who is “without God” or, more specifically, an atheist is someone who is without belief in the existence of God. When you encounter people who identify as atheists there are two types you will probably meet:

Strong atheists: These aren’t atheists who go to the gym a lot. Instead, a strong atheist is someone who makes this very strong claim: “God does not exist,” or “There is no God.” This is the traditional definition the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to when it says that atheism “rejects or denies the existence of God” (CCC 2125). Of course, such a sweeping claim requires



very good evidence to support it, and because of this heavy burden of proof many atheists choose to adopt a “weaker” or less controversial position instead.

Weak atheists: Weak atheists are often skeptical of the claims strong atheists make. They may even agree with the Psalmist who said, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1).² He might say that he can’t prove God does not exist, but he doesn’t have to because weak atheists say they simply “lack a belief in God” or they are “without God” in their lives. They say the burden of proof is on the theist (person who believes God exists). If the theist can’t make his case, then atheism wins by default.

However, atheists can’t be defined merely by their lack of belief in God. Puppies, babies, and automobiles lack a belief in God, but that doesn’t make your dog, your infant, or your pickup truck an atheist. Instead, a weak atheist is more properly defined as “someone who lacks a belief in God because he believes there are no good reasons to justify believing that God exists.” But this definition already belongs to another person involved in the debate over God’s existence—the agnostic.

Traditionally, in the history of philosophy, when it came to the question, “Does God exist?” a theist answered “Yes,” an atheist answered “No,” and an agnostic answered “I don’t know.” For an agnostic, the evidence is inconclusive in both directions. Pope Benedict XVI actually spoke positively of such people in a 2011 address:

In addition to the two phenomena of religion and anti-religion, a further basic orientation is found in the growing world of agnosticism: people to whom the gift of faith has not been given, but who are nevertheless on the lookout for truth, searching for God. Such people do not simply assert: “There is no God.” They suffer from his absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness. They are “pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace.”³

However, the *Catechism* reminds us that “agnosticism can sometimes include a certain search for God, but it can equally express indifferentism, a flight

from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience. Agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism” (CCC 2128).

Both the agnostic and the weak atheist share the same position: lack of belief in God because there seem to be no good reasons to think God exists. Many agnostics identify as atheists, however, because a vibrant subculture exists among those who call themselves atheists.

As an “atheist,” a non-believer might join a local club for atheists, visit atheist websites, or even wear clothes adorned with the red letter “A,” which has become a common symbol for atheism. But unlike in Hawthorne’s *Scarlett Letter*, this “A” is worn with pride. It often encompasses not just a lack of belief in God, but the belief that atheists are more rational than religious people. In fact, the philosopher Daniel Dennett, one of the pioneering “new atheists,” proposed that atheists should instead be known as “brights,” which tacitly implies that religious believers like you or Fr. Barron are “dims.”⁴

We will discuss the philosophical underpinnings of atheism shortly, but first we should turn to the main source of contention between believers and atheists: the existence of God.



ARE WE ALL ATHEISTS?

You may have noticed that in his first talk, Fr. Barron spent a significant amount of time talking about God before discussing atheism. This is important because Catholics and atheists often don’t agree about what the word “God” means.

For example, some atheists say, “You and I are both atheists. You are an atheist when it comes to mythological Gods like Zeus or Thor. I just happen to believe in one fewer God than you do.” But recall what Fr. Barron said about Anselm’s definition of God. St. Anselm of Canterbury defined God in his work *Monologion* as “that than which no greater can be thought.”⁵

If God is defined in this way, then not only do Catholics not believe in deities like Zeus or Thor, we know these beings are not “God.” They might be referred to as “gods,” or beings that are merely the object of worship, but beings like Zeus and Thor are not *God*. God is “that than which no greater can be thought,” and the gods of mythology could be greater if they had more to rule over, or if they were not constrained by time or space. Elevating beings like Zeus to the status of God is the same error the Galatians made when they, at one time, worshiped “things which by nature are not gods” (Gal 4:8).



The gods of mythology are just super-powered versions of human beings. In fact, the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle reached this conclusion 2,400 years ago, when belief in these gods was still popular. The one true God, in contrast, is so unlike anything we know that when we try to think about him we, as Fr. Barron says, often get it wrong.

J.B. Phillips wrote a great little book in 1952 called *Your God Is Too Small*, which is a good way to describe how many people both past and present think of God. For example, St. Paul exhorted the Greeks in Athens to abandon their idols because, as he said, “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25).

Modern people may think they aren't like silly pagans who tried to trap God in tiny little boxes, but modern man commits his own errors that make God too small. Even if he conceives of God as having unlimited power, he still might think of him as an invisible genie that exists beyond the edge of the physical universe. To them, God is a kind of super-being that peers into our cosmos and uses his super-vision to see what his human pets are doing. But large as this God is, he is still too small.

He is not the God of classical theologians like St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas, but is instead what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton call the god of “moralistic therapeutic deism.” This god is simply a powerful being that created the world (deism), wants us to be good (moralistic), and exists to help us when we're in need (therapeutic). He's not *ipsum esse* (“the sheer act of being itself”) who sustains all of existence through his perfect love. He's just a really powerful person.

While only about 2-5% of people identify as being atheists, many more people (about 20%) just say they are not religious. If they believe in God, it is probably the god of moralistic therapeutic deism. Sadly, even many religious people, including Catholics, think of God as this distant, deistic landlord whose job it is simply to keep the lights on and punish his tenants when they misbehave.

So what do we as Catholics really mean when we say, at every Sunday Mass, “I believe in one God”?



WHAT IS GOD?

Here is where the rich intellectual history of the Catholic Church bears its abundant harvest. For 2,000 years theologians and philosophers have peered into what the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto called *the mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, or “the fearful and fascinating mystery” of God.⁶ While their insights help us talk about God, even their careful reflections only scratch the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As we discuss who God is, we must be careful and deliberate with the language we use. The *Catechism* states:

Since our knowledge of God is limited, our language about him is equally so. We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking.

All creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God. The manifold perfections of creatures—their truth, their goodness, their beauty—all reflect the infinite perfection of God (CCC 40-41).

The goodness we observe in creatures gives us clues about what God is like (such as man’s rational nature telling us that God is pure intellect). But this kind of thinking runs the risk of reducing God to a kind of super-creature. The truth is that the most radical difference between God and his creatures is not a difference in power or wisdom. Instead, it’s the fact that while all creatures are defined by “what they are,” God is defined as “that which is.”

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, there is a difference between a thing’s essence (what it is) and a thing’s existence (that it is). You and I have a human essence, or what could be called a *human nature*. We are ordered towards distinctly human ends, such as rational thought and moral awareness.

While different creatures are ordered towards different ends, and thus have different essences, what they all have in common is that none of them has to exist. There could be a world without fish, or birds, or stars, or even people. But God is different. God is the being whose *essence is existence*. God is not one being in the universe, or even a being who exists outside of the universe in a special realm. Instead, God just is “existence,” or in the words of Pope St. John Paul II, “the great ‘Existent.’”⁷

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

VERY REVEREND ROBERT E. BARRON

Father Robert Barron is an acclaimed author, speaker, and theologian. He is the Rector/President of Mundelein Seminary/University of St. Mary of the Lake near Chicago and is also the founder of Word on Fire (www.wordonfire.org). Word on Fire is a global nonprofit media ministry that reaches millions of people by utilizing advanced technologies to draw people into or back to the Catholic Faith.

Fr. Barron is the creator and host of *CATHOLICISM*, a groundbreaking, 10-part Documentary and Study Program about the Catholic Faith. He is a passionate student of art, architecture, literature, music, and history, which he employs throughout the *CATHOLICISM* series.

Word on Fire programs have been broadcast regularly on WGN America, EWTN, Relevant Radio, and the Word on Fire YouTube Channel. Fr. Barron's website offers daily blogs, articles, commentaries, and over ten years of weekly sermon podcasts. Father Barron lectures in the United States and abroad, and has published numerous books, essays, and DVD programs. He is a frequent commentator on faith and culture for *NBC*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *FOX News*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *The Catholic Herald* in London, and *Catholic New World*.

Father Barron was ordained to the priesthood in 1986, and received his Master's Degree in Philosophy from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in 1982 and his doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Institut Catholique in Paris in 1992. Since then he has been a professor of systematic theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary. He was a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame in 2002 and at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in 2007. He was also twice a scholar in residence at the Pontifical North American College at the Vatican.

TRENT HORN

After his conversion to the Catholic faith, Trent Horn pursued an undergraduate degree in history from Arizona State University, and then earned a graduate degree in theology from the Franciscan University of Steubenville. He is currently pursuing a graduate degree in philosophy



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In 2012 Trent joined the staff of Catholic Answers, an organization that is dedicated to explaining and defending the Catholic faith. He currently serves them as a staff apologist and public speaker. Trent is a regular guest on the radio program *Catholic Answers Live* as well as the co-host of the weekly radio show *Hearts and Minds*, broadcast live in the Diocese of San Diego.

Trent is also an accomplished author who has penned dozens of booklets and articles about Catholic apologetics as well as two books, *Answering Atheism* (2013) and *Persuasive Pro-life* (2014), both of which are published by Catholic Answers Press. To learn more about Trent and his work visit his personal website, <http://trenthorn.com>.



ENDNOTES

† CHAPTER ONE

- 1) Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York: Bantam Press, 2006), I, 5.
- 2) Unless otherwise noted, all Bible citations come from *Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic Edition* (RSV-2CE).
- 3) Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Meeting for Peace in Assisi," October 27, 2011.
- 4) Daniel Dennett, "The Bright Stuff," *New York Times*, July 12, 2003.
- 5) Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, original 1076), 121.
- 6) Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12.
- 7) John Paul II, "The Proofs for God's Existence," Papal Audience, July 10, 1985.
- 8) Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 187.
- 9) Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2nd edition (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008), 12.
- 10) *Ibid*, 39.
- 11) Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 213.



12) Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

13) Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 83-84.

14) Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, Book I, Chapter 4.

15) Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, Chapter 1.1.

16) Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Introduction.

17) Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Kind of Humanism," 1946.

† CHAPTER TWO

18) Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 62-63.

19) Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Bantam Press, 2006) 77.

20) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second and Revised Edition, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), Introduction.

21) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 51.

22) Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 100-101.

23) Paul Edwards, "The Cosmological Argument," in *Critiques of God*, ed. Peter A. Angeles (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997), 51-52.

24) Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.



GLOSSARY

ANSELM (1033 – 1103): Monk, theologian, and Archbishop of Canterbury, he is known for his book *Proslogion*, which argues that reason requires men to believe in God, and *Cur Deus Homo*, which argues that Divine Love responding to human rebelliousness required that God should become a man.

BEING: existence as a unity or the fact that something “is.” We know that God is “being itself” and because of this, there is only one God (Dt 6:4). Within creation there are many different things that have “being” and exist as unified entities, but have different natures or essences.

CONTINGENT: something that depends on another event, situation, or being; opposite of necessary

EVIL: absence of good or a corruption of a good thing that God created. Moral evil occurs when a rational being, such as a human, acts against the good. Physical evil is the corruption of good, created things by a natural disaster or occurrence.

EXISTENTIALISM: a philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will. Existentialism tends to be atheistic (although there is a strand of Christian existentialism deriving from the work of Kierkegaard), to disparage scientific knowledge, and to deny the existence of objective values, stressing instead the reality and significance of human freedom and experience.

HOLY TRINITY: One God (being itself) in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), all with one, divine nature.

HYPOSTATIC UNION: Prior to the incarnation, God the Son was one person (his person is the Son) with one nature (his nature is divine). Upon becoming incarnate, God the Son assumed a second nature, a human nature, as the man Jesus. However, nothing in the person or the divine nature of God the Son changed during this process. God the Son as one person now possesses two natures, one fully divine and the other fully human.

INCARNATION: The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, assumed human nature and became man in order to accomplish our salvation. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both true God and true man, not part God and part man.

INFINITE: without end or limit. God is infinite because nothing limits him.

IPSUM ESSE: the “sheer act of being” or “being itself”

MIRACLE: when God intervenes in the world and causes an event to happen that has no natural explanation.

“MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM”: belief that God is simply a powerful being that created the world (deism), wants us to be good (moralistic), and exists to help us when we’re in need (therapeutic).

NATURE: Nature refers to what someone or something is or its essence.

NECESSARY: something that depends on nothing else to exist; opposite of contingent

NON-COMPETITIVE CAUSALITY: In regards to humans, God does not negate our freedom but, in knowing what we will freely do, he is able to fold our free choices into his good, providential plan for his creation. God’s providence does not compete with our freedom.

OMNIPOTENT: having complete or unlimited power

OMNISCIENCE: knowing every real of possible thing; having unlimited understanding or knowledge

PANTHEISM: the belief that every element of the universe is divine, and that divinity is equally present in everything.

PERSON: Person refers to someone in relationship with someone or something else (who someone is vis-à-vis another created thing).

PROCESS THEOLOGY: denies God has direct control over the world. Process theologians say God “persuades” rather than coerces his creation and so evil exists because such persuasion isn’t 100% effective.

PROOFS FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE: converging and convincing arguments for the existence of God. These are “ways” or paths that lead to a knowledge of God, but not in the sense of “proofs” as in the natural sciences.

PROVIDENCE: how God orders natural causes toward divinely-chosen, good ends.

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: St. Thomas Aquinas’ guide to “theology for beginners” which contains five ways of coming to know that God exists (five “proofs”).

