

**Nontheism:** “The difference between theism and non-theism is not whether one does or does not believe in God. Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold [while] non-theism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves... Nontheism is finally realizing there is no babysitter you can count on.” From Buddhist **Pema Chödrön** (compare to the God of Job).

**A/theism:** An approach which rejects the transcendent God of theism and finds an immanent god instead in the face of the other. Loving neighbor IS the loving of God.

**Post-theism:** A position that says both theism and atheism belong to a former age of discussion of *power*.

**Transtheism:** Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that “the courage to take meaninglessness into itself presupposes a relation to the ground of being which we have called ‘absolute faith.’ It is without a special content, yet it is not without content. The content of absolute faith is the ‘god above God.’ Absolute faith and its consequence, the courage that takes the radical doubt, the doubt about God, into itself, transcends the theistic idea of God.” (*The Courage to Be*)

### Resources:

- *The Disappearance of God*  
— Jewish Bible scholar Richard Elliott Friedman
- *There is No God and He is Always With You*  
— Buddhist teacher Brad Warner
- *Hoping Against Hope & What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*  
— Christian philosopher/theologian John Caputo
- *Why I Am an Atheist Who Believes in God*  
— ex-Evangelical activist Frank Schaeffer
- *Insurrection & The Divine Magician*  
— Christian philosopher Peter Rollins

# Doctrine

## *Christian Principles & Teachings*

Session 4: God, Theism, and Other Fables

*John Elliott Lein — May 5, 2019*

*Doctrine: a collection of teachings in a system of belief. True doctrine heals; it is a “doctor for our souls.”*

## Four Ways of Thinking “God”

This set of four categories to thinking about God is taken from talks by Peter Rollins referencing the work of John D. Caputo in *The Folly of God*.

### 1: God as Being

In this view, God is like us, a bigger, better version of ourselves. God as **Superman**, an all-knowing (*omniscient*), all-powerful (*omnipotent*) being who shares similar (but better values) as the humans who know/serve this Being. On the surface, much of our god-language sounds like this view.

### 2: God as Hyper-Being

The God of the mystics: god is not a *being* in the world like a human is, God is above and beyond all beings. Every time we talk about god as a Thing, we are talking about ourselves, as Karl Barth says, “with a megaphone.” Here, God is never what we say when we say the word “god,” which is why in the mystical tradition theism and atheism have always been connected. The mystic must be an atheist

toward their own theism, living between these poles of belief and disbelief.

- **Anselm of Canterbury (11<sup>th</sup> c.):** “God is that which none greater can be conceived.” That is, God is beyond conception, beyond thought.
- **Meister Eckhart (13<sup>th</sup> c.):** “I pray God rid me of god.” That is, the true God must always be beyond what I think of as god, always destroying idols.

### 3: God as the Ground of Being

The existentialists say that God grounds everything, as the field out of which all Subjects and Objects arise. I as Subject cannot relate to God as Object, or vice versa, because God is before these conceptions. As soon as you think of god as Object, you are thinking something less than God.

Theologians **Friedrich Schleiermacher (19<sup>th</sup> c.)** and **Paul Tillich (20<sup>th</sup> c.)** would say one cannot relate to god as a being at all, but by giving oneself to the world one eliminates the subject/object distinction and encounters God. God precedes objectivity and is not some *thing* to be thought. Therefore Tillich said some atheisms are closer to God than many forms of theism which make god into an object which is an idol; atheism becomes the pathway to the true God.

### 4: God as Event

In this final view, “God” is the name we give to a Call that calls us to something more than what is; that which reminds us that the universe is not one-dimensional; just as love, freedom, justice, democracy call us to better worlds and better beings there is the event of God.

God is the name given to that silent voice that calls us to repay hatred with love, violence with peace, suffering with beauty. injustice with justice. “God” is the name we give to Grace, in contrast to the natural order that **Simone Weil (20<sup>th</sup> c.)** called Gravity.

### What to do with this?

- **God as Super-Being** has been roundly critiqued by great theists and atheists alike, but as humans we can’t help but use this language. Paul Tillich calls us to remember that this language is powerfully *symbolic* which is always more than “just literal.” To take it *literally* is simply idolatry.
- **God as Hyper-Being** is the most orthodox view.
- **God as Ground of Being** is an in-between position.
- **God as Event** is the least theistic and most radical.

## More Words About “God” (because humans love labels)

**Theism (n):** belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in one god as **creator** of the universe, **intervening** in it and sustaining a **personal** relation to his creatures.

**Theism in Process Thought:** God *must* be in some respects temporal, mutable, and passible (all in contrast to classical theism). Theologian **John Cobb (20<sup>th</sup> c.)** says *process theology* “emphasizes event, occurrence, or becoming over substance.” See also **Teilhard de Chardin (20<sup>th</sup> c.)**.

**Anatheism:** “*ana-theos*, or God after God. A moment of creative ‘not knowing’ that signifies a break with former sureties and invites us to forge new meanings from the most ancient of wisdoms. *Anatheism* refers to an inaugural event that lies at the heart of every great religion, a wager between hospitality and hostility to the stranger, the other—the sense of something ‘more.’...Accepting that we can never be sure about God is the only way to rediscover a hidden holiness in life and to reclaim an everyday divinity.” (*Anatheism: Returning to God after God* by philosopher **Richard Kearney**)