

THEISM

A Study of Theism - *God*, and what Christians mean by *God*

Deut 6:4

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.”

Scripture reveals the Lord, YHWH, as a monotheistic God, the only one of his kind, who dwells in a heavenly spiritual trinitarian community with Jesus, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit of the divine godhead. This one Lord God, YHWH, together with Jesus, the Christ and the Holy Spirit created everything in the beginning.

This one God, YHWH, through his trinitarian relationship holds his creation accountable for their moral and spiritual life. Even before their creation of mankind loved them and set up a process of atonement from their disobedient lifestyle, providing forgiveness and a future life with the divine Trinity in an eternal kingdom.

Gen 1:1-3, John 1:1-3, Deut 6:1-4, Rom 1:18-32, Matt 28:18-20, Eph 1:3-11, Rev 20, 21

The Christian Prayer

Matthew 6:9-10

*“Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
¹⁰ Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.”*

A Definition of Theism

Encyclopedia Britannica.

“Theism, the view that all limited or finite things are dependent in some way on one supreme or ultimate reality of which one may also speak of in personal terms.

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this ultimate reality is often called YHWH, God, or Alah.”

Miriam Webster. Theism is “the belief in the existence of gods, or one God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world, who transcends yet is immanent in the world.”

The Purpose of this Study

This study is not intended to be a course in Apologetics, the discipline of *defending religious doctrines through systematic argumentation and discourse*, particularly within Christianity.

The study comes closer to being *a study in Christian theism which provides information or facts that explain what Christians mean by God, YHWH*.

Apologetics derives from the Greek ἀπολογία, *apología*, 'to speak in defense'.

In this study *we will not be defending God*, a ridiculous idea, He exists as *god* and needs no defense!

It is not the intention of this study to *speak in defense of theism* but *to explain what theologians mean when they speak of theism, God, gods, or supreme beings*.

Deut 6:4, a Scripture that sets the Tone for the Judeo/Christian view of Theism

The **YHWH** and *monotheism* of the Old Testament, or the Old Covenant, must be considered in the context of the new and developing nation, Israel, under Moses and then the Judges of Israel.

Israel was a new concept, a nation of Hebrews who had spent over 430 years as “slaves” in Egypt. They had no national language, alphabet, or national religion. Their first few years of their *exodus* from Egypt indicated that *Egyptian pagan polytheism* was still prevalent among the people.

At Mt Sinai, *Exodus*, **YHWH** gave Moses a series of “laws,” which have become known as the *Law of Moses*, which was a misnomer since it was instruction from YHWH and not from Moses. These instructions, *Torah*, would guide Israel as it faced a new future in their new home, Canaan, the Promised Land.

YHWH had to instruct the new nation to not succumb to the Egyptian and Canaanite Pagan Polytheism and to worship only **YHWH**, the Lord, as their private and national divinity, God.

As Israel progressed through the following centuries of Wilderness Wanderings, due to the repeated loss of faith in **YHWH** as the only God, Moses, the Judges, and the Prophets of Israel repeatedly had to reinterpret their relationship with YHWH, a righteous relationship with YHWH, in terms of *faith* and *not works of Law*.

Although Israel’s experience with **YHWH** in their sojourn in Canaan was explained in *monotheistic* terms, there was nevertheless a sense of dualism in Moses’ instruction of their national confession of faith, the *Shema*, of **Deut 6:4**. “Hear, O Israel: **The Lord** [YHWH] **our God** [Elohim, theos] **is one Lord** [YHWH]; ⁵ *and you shall love the Lord* [YHWH] **your God** [theos] *with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* ⁶ *And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;* ⁷ *and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.* ⁸ *And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.* ⁹ *And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”*

In what the New Testament leaders, the four canonical Gospel writers, and then Paul, and Peter described as *God’s final eschatological age and kingdom, the emphasis on Moses and the Prophets was redefined*. At his *transfiguration with Moses and Elijah* a voice from heaven instructed the disciples to listen to Jesus, not Moses and the Prophets. **Matt 17:1-8**, “¹ *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart.* ² *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.* ³ *And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.* ⁴ *And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* ⁵ *He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom*

I am well pleased; listen to him.”⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.”⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

The monotheistic right relationship with YHWH had to be re-interpreted with the coming of a divine messiah, prince, Dan 7, The preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, introduced the understanding that the monotheistic YHWH included three “persons” or divine expressions of a divine godhead, Col 1:19, 2:9, which was explained in the concept of Father, Son of the Father God, and a Holy Spirit of God, Matt 28:18-20, “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Col 1:15-20. “¹⁵ He [Jesus] is **the image of the invisible God**, the first-born of all creation;¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent.¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God [theos, divinity] was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Col 2:8-10. “⁸ See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.⁹ For in him the whole fulness of deity [θεότης *theótēs*, divinity, godhead¹] dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

YHWH, who in Canaan and the Promised Land of Israel, prior to the advent of the Messianic age, had been described to Israel in monotheistic terms, in the New Testament eschatological era of Christianity had to be described as a godhead of three “divinities” in one YHWH.

In Christ, the Messiah, the godhead was defied as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with all the authority of the full godhead residing in Jesus, the Son. Christian theology, in an effort to describe this mysterious relationship of YHWH have used the term *Trinity*, *three in one*, to describe the diverse function of YHWH to a new “generation” of believers in YHWH.

Theologians have long held that it is impossible to describe the ethereal nature of YHWH in human terms as that would reduce YHWH to human concepts! The result is that you describe YHWH analogously in terms of YHWH’s function or works. He is like a Father, but also acts like a son with a father, and his spiritual nature can only be described in spiritual-ness as holy, a totally different divine, not human, spirit!

Due to serious respect for YHWH, Lord God, the Jews were reluctant to use the word YHWH in common speech. They circumnavigate the respect issue by using names with lesser theological implications than YHWH.

Names such as *Adonai* “My Lord”. used during prayer and Torah reading, *HaShem*, literally, “The Name”, used in everyday speech to refer to God respectfully, *Elohim*, a plural form often translated as “God”, used frequently in the Torah, *El*, A more general term for “God”, also found in other Semitic languages. *El Shaddai*, “God Almighty”, *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, “I Am That I Am” from Exodus 3:14, expressing divine self-existence, *Tzevaot*, “Lord of Hosts,” *El Olam*, “Everlasting God,” *El Roi*, “God Who Sees, *Shalom*, “Peace”, sometimes used as a divine name

¹ Zodhiates.” θεότης *theótēs*; God. Deity, Godhead as directly revealed, divinity or divine power and majesty, a concept arrived at by observing God’s mighty works.”

in mystical contexts, *Shekhinah*, refers to the *Divine Presence*, especially in Kabbalistic and liturgical traditions.

In our recent contemporary age, philosophers and theologians have needed to describe YHWH in contemporary terms as the *prime origin*, *the first cause*, the *original* creator behind all creative thinking, and *original reason behind all reason!*

Terms in Theistic Thinking

The belief that one, or more, *divine supreme beings* has resulted in *human philosophy of religion* through human existence in several forms, each with a *unique definition of its belief*. Viewed from the Judeo/Christian viewpoint the following are the most common forms of theism encountered in a discussion of theism. The different beliefs are shaped by several factors; ***ethnic generational history***—Hinduism—Natural powers, Buddhism, Judaism; ***geographic world view***—Aryan, Hinduism, Buddhism, Greek; ***political era***—Judaism, Islam, ***historical setting***, Islam; ***religious awakening***, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity.

The description of each of the above theistic views is broad and can be sharpened historically and geographically. These definitions are broad and in most cases can be sharpened considerably/

God

The English word ***god*** primarily refers a being of *superior nature* who is *different in nature or existence* from **man**, **humanity**.

God in most religions is a *supreme celestial being* without beginning and end.

The Oxford English Dictionary, “god”

In *Christianity* and other monotheistic religions ***god*** refers to the creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; the supreme being.

In certain *other religions* ***god*** refers to a superhuman being or spirit worshiped as having power over nature or human fortunes; a deity.

Theism

Theism is the *belief in a supreme being, a god or absolute reality, separate and apart from the human and physical world, and that there is adequate evidence to support such a view in the existence and reality of an absolute being* who is responsible for creation and the origin of life in man.

The *Judeo/Christian* and *Islamic* religions fall under the category of monotheistic religions.

Monotheism

The belief that there is *only one divine being* who in some cases has revealed his nature in different forms, *Jewish monotheism*, one Lord and one God; *Christianity*, one Trinitarian Godhead, *Islam*, one God, Allah, one prophet Mohammad, one Scripture, *Quran*.

Monotheism as a description of **YHWH** originated due to Israel’s history in Egypt, Canaan Assyria, Babylon, all nations which espoused a *polytheistic understanding* of the divine.

Moses’ plea to Israel just before the crossed out of Canaan into a new world is expressed in his final message to Israel. “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord [YHWH] our God [Elohim, theos] is one Lord [YHWH];*⁵ *and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*⁶ *And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;*⁷ *and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*⁸ *And you shall*

bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Deism

The view that there is one universal being/power responsible for the physical and human world.

Encyclopedia Britannica. “Deism, an *unorthodox religious attitude* that found expression among a group of English writers ... in the first half of the 17th century, ending ... in the middle of the 18th century. These writers subsequently inspired a similar religious attitude in Europe during the second half of the 18th century and in the colonial United States of America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

“In general, Deism refers to what can be called “natural religion”, the acceptance of a certain body of religious knowledge that is inborn in every person or that can be acquired by the use of reason and the rejection of religious knowledge when it is acquired through either personal revelation, or the teaching of a church or philosophical/religious source.”

Cambridge Dictionary. “Deism is a philosophical system that *acknowledges God*, but considers him a *passive observer of his creation*. *God does not interfere with his creation!*

Deism could be seen as kind of *compromise between faith and science.*”

Polytheism

Encyclopedia Britannica. Polytheism is basically the belief in many gods.

Polytheism characterizes virtually all religions other than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which share a common tradition of monotheism, the belief in one God.

Sometimes the many gods form a polytheistic religion having a supreme creator and focus of devotion, as in certain phases of Hinduism (there is also the tendency to identify the many gods as so many aspects of the Supreme Being); sometimes the gods are considered as less important than some higher goal, state, or saviour, as in Buddhism; sometimes one god will prove more dominant than the others without attaining overall supremacy, as Zeus in Greek religion. Typically, polytheistic cultures include belief in many demonic and ghostly forces in addition to the gods, and some supernatural beings will be malevolent; even in monotheistic religions there can be belief in many demons, as in New Testament Christianity.

Polytheism can bear various relationships to other beliefs. It can be incompatible with some forms of theism, as in the Semitic religions; it can coexist with theism, as in Vaishnavism; it can exist at a lower level of understanding, ultimately to be transcended, as in Mahayana Buddhism; and it can exist as a tolerated adjunct to belief in transcendental liberation, as in Theravada Buddhism.

Henotheism

Henotheism primarily means *the worship of one god* while accepting the existence of other gods.

The god worshipped is determined by *family, ethnic group, or geographic emphases*.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. “Henotheism comes to us from the German word *Henotheismus*, which in turn is derived from Greek *hen-* (“one”) and “*theos*” (“god”).

Someone who engages in henotheism *worships one god but does not deny that there are others*.

Max Müller, a respected 19th-century scholar, is credited with promoting the word *henotheism* as a counterpart to “polytheism” (“belief in or worship of more than one god”) and “monotheism” (“the doctrine or belief that there is but one God”). Müller also used the related

word *kathenotheism*, from Greek *kath' hena* ("one at a time"), for the *worship of several gods successively*.

Encyclopedia Britannica. "In the 19th century the terms *henotheism* and *kathenotheism* were used to refer to the exalting of a *particular god* as exclusively the highest within the framework of a particular liturgy or cultural framework."

Pantheism

Encyclopedia Britannica. "Pantheism, the doctrine that *the universe conceived of as a whole is God* and, conversely, that *there is no God but the combined substance, forces, and laws that are manifested in the existing universe*. The cognate doctrine of *panentheism* asserts that *God includes the universe as a part though not the whole of his being*.

Both "pantheism" and "panentheism" are terms of recent origin, coined to describe certain views of the relationship between God and the world that are different from that of traditional theism. As reflected in the prefix "pan-" (Greek *pas*, "all"), both of the terms *stress the all-embracing inclusiveness of God, as compared with his separateness as emphasized in many versions of theism*.

On the other hand, pantheism and panentheism, since they *stress the theme of immanence—i.e., of the indwelling presence of God*—are themselves versions of theism conceived in its broadest meaning. *Pantheism stresses the identity between God and the world, panentheism (Greek en, "in") that the world is included in God but that God is more than the world*.

Atheism

Primarily, *atheism* is the belief that *there is no god or supreme being*.

An *alpha privative*, from Latin *alpha privātivum*, as the prefix *a-* or *an-*, before vowels, is used in Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit and Greek and in words borrowed in English to *express negation or denial* of the following word.

Atheism denies, negates, the reality of everything theistic. It denies belief in a divine being. In common terms *atheism denies the existence of a god*, or the existence of any real evidence of belief in theism.

Agnosticism

Agnosticism is derived from the *alpha privative, negation or denial of*, and Greek *gnosis, knowledge*, meaning *there is not enough knowledge to support theism*. *The agnostic may believe in a god, but recognizes this is not based on real empirical knowledge*.

Merriam-Webster. "Agnosticism is the view that *knowledge of any ultimate reality, such as of a deity, is unknown and probably unknowable*. This is a philosophical or religious position characterized by *uncertainty about the existence of a god, or any gods*.

Agnosticism argues that there is *not enough real evidence, mostly empirical evidence*, to support the claims for the existence of, or knowledge of a god.

Philosophic Arguments in Support of the Theistic Views of Religion

Faith is not dependent on empirical evidence, but all faith must be supported by adequate testimony, oral, personal, written, archaeological testimony. Christians do not believe that *religious faith* is based on, or "proven" by, empirical faith. There is no adequate empirical evidence for proving the existence of God!

Archaeological evidence merely provides testimony to the fact that something extraordinary might have taken place, but such discoveries do not prove a religious event took place.

Scripture provides excellent *literary, psychological, historical, and personal psychological* evidence to some event, even one of considerable importance, such as *the resurrection of Jesus*. But we have no empirical evidence other than the *written evidence* of Scripture and *the existence of the church for over 2000 years*, and the resolute historical faithfulness of Christians in the face of persecution and martyrdom such as Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, ca. 155 CE. However, there is more than adequate evidence, *oral, written, historical* in support of a resurrection faith².

We should note that the classical philosophic arguments for the existence of God prove nothing! They merely support a view of faith.

The writer of the New Testament document, Hebrews, expresses this well, **Heb 11:1-3**. “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* ² *For by it the men of old received divine approval.* ³ *By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.*”

The major philosophical arguments for *faith* and *theism*.

The Cosmological argument

This is the cosmological *cause and effect* principle. The cosmos is evidenced in a sequence of *cause-effect* cycles. Every cause has an effect, *every effect must have a cause*. Without a first cause that produced the *first effect* you have a meaningless cause-effect system. A *new cause initiates a cause-effect chain cycle which promotes a new effect*.

Without a first cause to set a chain in motion you end up with a *meaningless cycle of cause and effect*.

The Christian application of this is that God is that *first non-effect, without cause* that was therefore *the first-cause of all cause and effect cycles*.

The Teleological design argument

The teleological argument posits that *the apparent design and purpose in the universe* imply the existence of *an intelligent designer, often identified as God*.

The argument, also known as the *argument from design*, asserts that *the complexity and functionality* observed in the natural world suggest *the presence of a purposeful creator*. The term "teleology" comes from the Greek word "telos," meaning "end" or "purpose," and it refers to explanations that appeal to design and purpose in nature.

The argument from religious experience

This view is not an argument intended to prove that a God exists, but it does explain the universal fact that men from all ages and global widespread have worshiped a divine being, power, god, or gods.

The argument from religious experience is an argument for the existence of God. It holds that the best explanation for religious experiences is that they constitute genuine experience or perception of a divine reality. Various reasons have been offered for and against accepting this contention.

Contemporary defenders of the argument are Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Alister Hardy.

² Cf. Wolfhardt Pannenberg, on the *Resurrection* of Christ. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 33, Issue 4, August 1980, pp. 345 – 359.

The Ontological argument

This argument was popularized by St Anselm of Canterbury, 1100 CE. The Ontological argument is one of the most fascinating arguments for the existence of an all-perfect God.

It is called the ontological argument because it argues from the existence of God as the greatest possible being.

While there are several different versions of the argument, all argue that ***it is self-contradictory to deny that there exists a greatest possible being***. Thus, on this general line of argument, ***it is a necessary truth that such a being exists***; and **this being is the God** of traditional Western theism.

Arguments from Mysticism

Most religions incorporate mysticism in their religious faith. This mysticism is often based on treasured religious experiences or on the example of religious leaders whose religious experience is honored and treasured. Jewish mysticism is a major factor in both the Jewish and Cristian experiences. 1 Enoch, a major Jewish Mystical text, is influential in both the Jewish and Christian faiths providing encouragement struggling situations. Mystical traditions strengthen faith/ The do not prove a viewpoint.

The Relationship of Faith/Trust/ Fiducia with Theism

Notitia knowing about Jesus, or *knowledge about Jesus* is not to be equated with *Fiducia* Faith.

There is more involved in *Fiducia* faith than knowing about Jesus. One has to *trust* the *Notitia* as a reliable basis for faith. *The examination of the Notitia is a necessarily step toward Fiducia obedient Faith.*

Assensus, accepting the knowledge of *Notitia* Scripture, forms the basis of a movement in believing and moving toward *Fiducia/Trust*. One has to examine the *Notitia* of Scripture to determine whether it can be trusted, or believed. One has to *accept*, *Assensus*, the *Notitia* information of Scripture, and *decide* to act on the information, either to follow it and ***obey*** it, or to ***reject*** it as sound information.

Fiducia is the ***trust*** point where one has decided to accept, ***to trust*** the *Assensus*, the information of Scripture as *Notitia*, and ***act on it in an obedient faith***.

One can simplify this cycle as a ***movement of, or maturing faith*** from Scriptural knowledge [Notitia] to ***believing or acknowledging the knowledge***, in a ***faith decision*** [Assensus], *to where* one would ***trust*** [Fiducia] and ***obey the faith*** knowledge.

Faith is obviously **two dimensional**; an **accepting faith** [Assensus] and an **obedient saving faith** [Fiducia] that causes on to obey.

Some can believe in Jesus, but not be willing to obey Jesus!

Some can believe that Jesus died on the cross [Assensus] but ***not be willing to obey him*** [Fiducia] ***in faith and baptism***, Rom 8:1-11.

Hence we have two dimensions or “poles” in faith, *Assensus* and *Fiducia*; ***believing information faith***, and ***obedient trusting saving faith***.

The Cycle of *Fiducia*, Active Saving Faith/Trust

Introduction

In the origin and development of faith as *saving faith or trust* there are four elements, *information* (*notitia*, to take notice), *knowledge* (*assensus* the acceptance of that information), and *trust* (*fiducia*, the decision to act on that information or knowledge), and *the cycle of returning to reexamine* the information and build on it from a deeper understanding of the information.

In the Christian faith, *Scripture is a primary source of notitia, religious knowledge.*³

Notitia. *Notitia* refers to the **content** of faith, or **information** that we believe. We place our faith in something, for example, **Scripture**. We examine Scripture to determine whether it is sound or reliable, and whether it is a reasonable source of religious knowledge.

Assensus. *Assensus* is our **decision to accept** the **information** provided by Scripture which becomes knowledge or *Assensus*. We give our assent to, or **accept** the information. But one can know about the Christian faith from Scripture and yet decide to do nothing about that knowledge. You might believe it to be true, but not act on it. Many people believe in Jesus, they accept the information regarding Jesus, but ignore him as the Lord that Scripture teaches. Jesus is just part of the **knowledge** (*Assensus*) one gains from the information one accepts, (the *Notitia* or information gained from Scripture) and even believe that knowledge to be true, but that is not saving faith or trust (*Fiducia*). Saving faith or *Fiducia* derives from a wilful decision to accept and act on the knowledge we have. The knowledge may not be perfect, but that is what faith is, it is a decision to accept the knowledge we gain from evidence such as Scripture.

Fiducia. *Fiducia* or **trust** results from the *decision to accept and act upon the evidence of Scripture*.

This process leads to **personal trust** and *reliance*.

Knowing and believing the content of the Christian faith is not enough, for even demons can do that, James 2:19.

Fiducia, faith, trust is only *effectual* if, *knowing* about and assenting to the claims of Jesus, *one personally obediently trusts in Him for salvation*.

The Cycle of Faith. Faith often begins slowly and may begin as an immature faith and trust, but one returns to the source of the faith, the *Notitia* which is Scripture and continues to examine Scripture and its teachings and implications, learning more and growing on one's knowledge of the faith.

In this developing cycle of *Fiducia*, *trusting faith*, there is no absolute beginning point. All of us at several points in our Christian life need to get into this cycle and strengthen our faith.

Scripture should be the foundation *notitia*, *information*, that we need to *review as we refresh and develop our Christian faith*.

³ This cycle is adapted from information from Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions and Answers*, Vol. 2, Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1971, pp. 30 ff; Ian A. Fair, *Wolfhart Pannenberg's Reaction to Dialectical Theology*, PhD dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 1975; E. Frank Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, Philadelphia; The Westminster Press, 1972, pp. 122 ff.

A diagram of the *Circle of Faith*

