Think • Vol 24 • No 71 • Autumn 2025, 41–46

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X

Living without a God

*Hugh LaFollette**

University of South Florida, Tampa, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: hhl@usf.edu

Keywords: theism; atheism; habits; self-understanding

Abstract

Although I am no longer religious, I do not disparage all forms of all religions nor trash all religious people. Still, I want to isolate significant deficiencies in many of those forms. I focus primarily on forms of Christianity since these are ones with which I – and many readers – are most familiar. I then show how non-religious people can achieve what religious ones do, without the baggage, by attending to what is most within our control.

Many people are religious. Some are devout, or at least claim to be. Those who are religious vary in their affiliation (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, etc.) and sect (e.g., Baptist, Catholic). Others do not practise any religion. They neither contribute nor participate, except at an occasional marriage or funeral. Still others consider themselves spiritual, albeit not religious. Finally, some reject the current practice of religion.

I began my life in the first camp and end in the latter. Here I briefly explain why. I do not pretend my arguments best all theistic claims. Perhaps I am even unfair. Still my journey is not unfamiliar, at least to non-theists. I suspect, though, that some of my observations are ones some believers have neither heard nor contemplated. Some, I suspect, occasionally worry about some of these, albeit quietly.

Thinking about religion and religious belief is valuable given religion's historical significance. Many counties fought wars and ruled in its name. It dictated or shaped myriad laws and cultural practices. Although these roles may have diminished, they have not disappeared – to the detriment of believers and societies. More than a few practitioners condemn anyone outside their preferred religion. (To illustrate, consider what is deemed the funniest religious joke of all time.)

We should think *about* religion to better understand who we are and how we came to be. If we are better informed, we can be more responsible, whether we continue to be religious or not.

Plan

I will not debunk all forms of all religions nor trash all religious people. I will identify significant deficiencies. I focus primarily on forms of Christianity since these are ones with which I – and many readers – are most familiar. I then show how non-religious people can achieve what religious ones do, without the baggage, by attending to what is most within our control.

Problems with Common Religious Forms

Before explaining why there is no god, I note that the deity portrayed in many religions is morally reprehensible. I focus on the Judaeo-Christian deity, since it is one with which many readers are most familiar. In claiming this deity is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press



Credit: Cro Magnon/shutterstock.com

morally reprehensible, I do not distort common teachings. I use biblical portrayals of god featured in stories like those of Adam, Noah and Job, stories most of us learned as kids.

According to the book of Genesis, after creating the universe, god created Adam (2: 7). He (god's reported gender) forbad Adam from eating fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2: 17). After god decided Adam needed a helpmate, he created Eve (21–2). Gen 3 explains that a serpent tempted Eve to eat said fruit – rules be damned. She ate the fruit and gave Adam a bite. God was not happy. He cursed Eve: she had to conceive and carry children (16). Adam had to work the land.

As many of you may know, some religious individuals try to explain this (and other) stories away, to claim that they are metaphorical. Many believers reject these reinterpretations. Whether metaphorical or not, these spell trouble for a Christian conception of god.

God punished Adam not for doing 'wrong' in any ordinary sense of that term, but for disobeying him. God told Adam not to eat said fruit. (He could have told them: 'don't pick your nose while standing on your left leg'.) But why is disobeying god wrong unless what Adam did was wrong, independent of the command? Otherwise, god looks like a mob boss who expects compliance, no matter what the command. That does not sound like the actions of a noble creature.

Then in Gen 6: 11–15, we learn about Noah. God did not like the way Noah's neighbours acted. So, god devised a scheme to save Noah and punish everyone else. He instructed Noah to build a boat on which he could carry his family and one pair of all animal species. Then the rain came. Forty days and nights. Non-stop. Any creature not on the boat died, including all people, no matter their age, and all animals – sans those fortunate enough to be chosen for a boat ride.

Is that a suitable death for two-year-olds, mentally challenged twelve-year-olds, or George and Georgina Giraffe? What would we think of a human who did this? We would deem him a 'moral monster'. So we should. We would not revere him or consider him kind, generous or loving.

Then there is Job as described in the book by that name. Job was upright. But Satan (why did god create Satan?) came to god and bet him that Job would no longer continue to worship him if he (Job) lost all he cared for. On a bet god allowed Job to lose his family, wealth and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

standing. By golly, he was going to show that devil!

God won the wager. Job never cursed god. But to what end? So that god could *demonstrate* that he was right? What would we say of a human engaging in such a wager? We would not praise him.

Finally, many Old Testament laws would be anathema to a morally sensitive person. Read it for yourself and see. To get you started, consider these: Leviticus 12:5, 20:9, & 21:18–21; Deuteronomy 23:1–2; Psalm 137:8–9; Isaiah 3:16–17; Jeremiah 13:15–26; Judges 11: 30–9 &18:1–28; Hosea 13:4, 9, 16.

Even if we might find ways to avoid these criticisms, defenders must still have to explain what is crucial to many of them: an afterlife – specifically heaven and hell.

The Afterlife

Before discussing the afterlife's main forms, we should determine its purpose. It was designed as a form of reward and punishment. Rewarded or punished for what? Not, for how we live – at least in the ordinary sense of that term. But for what we believe. This clashes with what the law and most of us expect of ourselves and others. We punish citizens for violating the law, where the law proscribes certain *behaviours*: murder, assault, rape, theft, etc. And we punish more serious harms (murder) more severely than less serious ones (petty theft). We do not punish people for what they believe, unless we can show that their beliefs directly harm others. But then we are not god. Thank goodness.

There are also damning criticisms of heaven and hell.

Heaven

Since heaven is not just *a* form of reward, but its highest form, you would think it would give humans what they most want. You would be wrong. Heaven features little that people relish and much they abhor.

What do people enjoy while living? Sex, money, friendship, competition (e.g. sports). None of these are permitted in heaven described within the bible or common religious teachings.

What they *will* do in heaven are things many believers dislike, such as singing songs to the deity. As Twain notes, most people barely endure singing hymns in church. In heaven they must do this until the end of time.

'... you would think we would be leery of relying on testimony for such an important belief, especially since we have ample historical and personal evidence of ways such testimony has misfired.'

Hell

What is hell? It is a prison from which there is no release (Jude 6), suffering in a lake of fire (Rev. 20: 12–15}. Non-believers are never free of conscious torment (Matt. 13.49–50).

Is this something a moral creature would design and sustain? No. We would not tolerate a criminal justice system that treated prisoners this way. Even if one thinks people chose this torment, we should remember that god established the system whereby this was an option. Consider an analogy. A mob boss tells me I must do what he says *or else*. The boss cannot then claim to be innocent of the harm done by or to his charges.

Since god could have made anything good or bad, and change it on a whim, the contention that god is good is ludicrous. God has one trait: omnipotence. The response to such a creature might be fear (like the capo to the boss). But fear is not reverence, much less admiration.

In sum, believers face a dilemma: they are 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'. Option one: good is independent of god. On

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

this option, we might wonder what god's role is in making for moral action. It seems there is only one plausible role: to motivate people to do good. Such a god does not determine what is good.

Option two: good is dependent on god. If so, in what sense is God good? To say god keeps his promises is simply a report of what god has done *until now*. Tomorrow? That is another story. Saying this does not identify what *is good*, and it says nothing meaningful about god's moral traits. It is simply to say god is god.

These issues are vexing once we see a similar dilemma with the criteria for admission to heaven and hell. People cannot reach heaven because they did 'good works', unless that simply means that they did what god told them to do (recall the story of Adam and Eve). If so, the price of admission is morally unacceptable.

The issue is further complicated if one holds, as many prominent denominations do, that once someone is saved, then she is always saved. And if salvation is won by saying the 'magic words' 'I repent' and 'I believe', then once she has uttered said words, she can do whatever she wishes without cost.

Of course, believers might contend that *true* believers would not do that. But how could we confidently aver that, given the requirements for salvation?

There is no Deity

Most believers think it is indisputable that there is a god … and that they know what his characteristics are. The first half of this claim is dubious; the second, peculiar. Here's why. If one thinks god is omnipotent, wholly good and everlasting, while we are ignorant, weak and transient, how could we know that there is a being with said traits?

We could decide based on evidence – in the same way we would decide that Antarctica exists and unicorns don't. I will say more about this option shortly. What is especially peculiar is that many believers' claim there is a god is based largely on testimony, initially the testimony of others who taught them (parents or preachers), and eventually the testimony of the deity via revelation (the Bible or Koran says so).

However, you would think we would be leery of relying on testimony for such an important belief, especially since we have ample historical and personal evidence of ways such testimony has misfired. Many in my generation grew up as racists. Our beliefs arose from the teaching of parents, friends, preachers and society. Those claims were 'reinforced' by 'self-fulfilling prophecies': we scrounged for ways to construe African Americans' behaviour as evidence supporting our beliefs.

Finally, it is not so much that we need to show evidence *that there is no deity*. It should be sufficient to show that we have no evidence there is one – certainly not the one many religious people worship. Should I have to prove that there are no unicorns or green, bespeckled canary men? No.

The reasoning here is even more compelling for common portrayals of the Christian god. That god is vicious, small-minded, mean-spirited and fickle. He wants to roast those who will not suck up to him and expects followers to constantly sing his praises.

Moreover, the standard account of creation of the earth and animals is wildly at odds with what we now know. The earth is neither stationary nor flat, even if thousands of people 'around the globe' once believed it was. Species (animal kinds taken into the ark) are not fixed but change over time when confronting evolutionary pressures.

Admittedly, some Christians reject these implications. Moreover, they dislike traits often attributed to god. Although such a religion is more acceptable, it differs from what most learned people, and many adherents, still embrace.

A few people offer arguments for the god of the New Testament. Probably the most widely employed was forwarded by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. He contends that we face a trilemma. Jesus reportedly claimed he was god. Lewis claims he must be a liar, lunatic, or the Lord he claims to be.

However, these are not the only choices. First, Jesus did not indisputably claim he was Lord, at least not in any non-debatable sense of that term. Moreover, even if he did, he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

might simply have been mistaken. Finally, his followers probably amplified his claims beyond what he himself endorsed.

Many religions have central inspirational figures who claimed to be divine in *some sense* of that term. Yet I do not hear Christians averring that these leaders must be lord, lying or lunatics. Why isn't the trilemma equally applicable to them?

Especially since, if we must choose between competing religious leaders, whom do we choose … and why? We should look for evidence favouring competing claims. What might that evidence be? Testimony won't do the trick unless we have independent evidence of the insight and reliability of the witness … just as we might in a court proceeding with seemingly incompatible claims by purported witnesses. And a number of seemingly reliable people offer conflicting testimony.

We might also look for miracles. However, most religions claim that their leaders did miracles. Although there, as in Christianity, evidence that the event happened as reported is thin, and the evidence that there are no better explanations is wanting. Satanists claim they have evidence of Satanic miracles. Should we just assume they, but not we, are mistaken? I suppose the Christian might contend events happened but were evil rather than good. However, this poses the earlier dilemma in different dress: if we have an independent account of goodness, then we do not need a god to explain good; instead, we can judge the deity by said standards. Moreover, it seems the only grounds for claiming supremacy for a Christian god's miracles, but not those of Muhammed or a Wiccan, is our pre-existing belief that we follow the *real* god. That answer is unsatisfactory. Especially since there are no general reasons to believe that there is a deity (in any sense recognizable to most religions), and compelling reasons for thinking there is not.

Reasons to Doubt There is a God

The very idea of a creature that neither changes nor dies is incoherent. Can god not kill himself? If not, then there is something he cannot do. And why assume there is an omnipotent creature at all? Or, if it has no role resembling that described in most religions, why should we admire or follow it?

'As many of you may know, some religious individuals try to explain this (and other) stories away, to claim that they are metaphorical. Many believers reject these reinterpretations. Whether metaphorical or not, these spell trouble for a Christian conception of god.'

What kind of evidence might there be for a deity? It is difficult to imagine. We cannot see or hear or touch such a being. And, as Richard Dawkins argues in the *Blind Watchmaker*, there is no – nor could there be any – empirical evidence for it. What we have, instead, is ample evidence that our chaotic and complex universe spawned complicated life forms via evolutionary forces in ways described by Dawkins and other scientists, and deftly explained by James Rachels in his masterful *Created from Animals* (1990). A scientific understanding of the world reveals a revolving orb, not a flat surface fixed in space. Scientific understanding of the earth and species is incompatible with a world view described in Old Testament stories on which most Christians cut their religious teeth.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Actions of Religious People

Some religious people are decent, even noble human beings. If they are, and they think their beliefs make them the kind of people they are, I have no objection to their being religious. I am more concerned about how people live than what they believe.

Unfortunately, too many Christians I hear and see are not decent. Many employ their religious beliefs as a cudgel to 'justify' selfishness. This is unsurprising. A religion shaped by their views of reward and punishment assumes selfishness is people's defining characteristic. Thus, it encourages people to focus on having 'the right beliefs' and on the future; it diverts their attention from what they could do now to benefit the environment and lives of others. It ensures they are minimally empathetic.

Finally, these religious folks tend to (a) be authoritarian and rely on fear to motivate themselves and others, and (b) exclude anyone unlike them in ways that breed and sustain racism and sexism.

Each of these flaws connects to an overarching flaw of many religious people: an unwillingness to demand evidence and then draw their conclusions from that evidence. How can I make such a seemingly rash claim? It is because this flaw is written in many religions' DNA, as exhibited in familiar beliefs in an afterlife, in the embrace of stories of a small-minded deity, and a propensity to believe in a deity at all given the absence of evidence for one. These beliefs lead people to utter saws they think must be helpful or laudatory, such as 'God was protecting you' or 'You will see them again', despite the fact that there is no reason for making these claims. Moreover, they fail to grasp that if these claims *were* true, it would show god to be fickle (why protect me and not Jane Doe?) and morally callous – by assigning the majority of mankind to eternal damnation.

You Don't Need God to Have Alleged Benefits

Religion sometimes plays positive roles attributed to it. It seems to make some people caring and calm and happy. The mistake is assuming that only religious people can achieve these goods. We can have all that is *worth having* without heavy moral baggage. Non-religious people are not always caring and calm. But they can be.

In understanding the importance of others for us and for their role in making us better people, we can act appropriately without religious presuppositions. Indeed, it may be easier to do so, since we do not have to adopt or accommodate authoritarian, selfish and exclusivist tendencies.

Indeed, non-religious people are less likely to help others for dubious reasons or out of tainted motives. We can help people *because they need help*, not because we were told to, because we fear god or want his reward, nor as an excuse to seek to convert those we help.

Conclusion

I am happy calling myself a 'Christian Atheist' – one who thinks there is no deity, but who also thinks that the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (the longest recorded sustained statement attributed to the founder of Christianity) provide sage moral advice. We can embrace those teachings, without debating theology, fearing an afterlife, worshipping a petulant deity or embodying negative traits of too many religious people.

We can, instead, focus on the present, on what is within our control. This will lead to better outcomes for us, for others, and for the environment.

Hugh LaFollette

Hugh LaFollete is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of South Florida.

Cite this article: LaFollette H (2025) Living without a God. *Think* **24**, 41–46. https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562510078X Published online by Cambridge University Press