

maranatha

A brief glossary of 'isms'



What do they mean?

The terms in this folder are often used today and these short explanations are put forward to help in our understanding of their meaning.

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Agnosticism

An agnostic is someone who does not know whether any god exists, and claims not to care. Agnostics believe there is insufficient evidence on which to make any decisions about the existence of God. (*From the Greek 'not knowing'*).

Animism

A specific form of polytheism in which it is held that many gods of nature direct or animate the world – storm gods, river gods, and so on.

Atheism

The belief that no god exists. Here 'god' simply means a powerful spiritual being that is capable of interacting with humans.

Behaviourism

Positivism applied to human affairs; a denial of inner spiritual life.

Consumerism

The belief, extended to all areas of life, that one should "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die". The belief that satisfaction is gained by possession. Closely related to materialism.

Deism

The view that God, having created the universe, has little interest in it and leaves it to its own devices. *By contrast the Bible says that God loves the world so much, that He sent His son to rescue it.* (St. John 3:16)

Dualism

The belief that concepts appear in pairs of opposites. A dualist acknowledges two gods. Generally one will be said to be good and the other evil.

Empiricism

The belief that all knowledge derives from what we experience with our senses, so that the mind begins as a blank slate (*'tabula rasa'*) on which experiences are recorded.

Existentialism

An individualist form of humanism. Notorious for inducing *existential despair* at one's own condition.

Gnosticism

The belief that you are saved by what you know – by knowledge that you must acquire, often hidden (or 'occult,' which really means 'hidden'). Christians by contrast believe they are saved by *who* they know – Jesus.

Hedonism

The continual pursuit of pleasure, generally short-term, for its own sake as an end in itself.

Humanism

The belief that humanity is responsible only to itself (not to any god). Man must therefore try to create his own purpose.

Idealism

The belief that ideas are the deepest reality (perhaps in the mind of an omnipotent god), and that the things we see are mere representations of these ultimate 'ideals', and unimportant.

Individualism

The belief that the rights of the individual are supreme. Ignores responsibilities to others and cannot solve the problem that rights of persons with differing tastes are often incompatible. Individualism is

two-edged; in overly collective societies it is a good thing, but in overly free societies such as the West it has become a bad thing.

Materialism

Materialism is the belief that true value and meaning reside in the material world (this belief is often also called **Realism**). Since gods are spiritual entities, materialism is correlated with atheism.

Modernism

A secular and materialist way of life based on an optimistic belief in progress through science and technology. Modernism was the way of life of most people in the West in the 20th century until the 1960s. It believes that 'man is perfectible' and fails to acknowledge human sin.

Monism

The view that all is one at the ultimate level. Rejects the distinction between creator and creation.

Monotheism

A monotheist acknowledges just one god. The differing monotheistic religions ascribe different properties to that god. The three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – all assert that their god *created* the universe (including humanity).

Multiculturalism

A multicultural society is one in which different groups have widely differing ways of life, generally because they have migrated from another part of the world. The Roman Empire was multicultural, and Britain is today. In a multicultural society there is not likely to be any agreed way of

resolving clashes between these groups.

Mysticism

The world has both spiritual and material aspects. Mysticism is the belief that the physical aspect does not matter and has no ultimate meaning or reality compared to the spiritual. Jews and Christians see both aspects as important (eg, the Incarnation).

Nihilism

The belief that nothing matters, nothing is important and that life has no purpose.

Paganism

Belief in the forces of nature, often in an animistic belief system, frequently involving witchcraft and wicca. A word often used by monotheists to describe non-monotheistic belief and worship.

Panentheism

A form of monotheism in which the one god is *in* everything. (Christianity holds that God the Holy Spirit is in believers uniquely, but that all humans are made in the image of God.)

Pantheism

Monistic monotheism: all is one and is divine, so that god is everything.

Pluralism

A pluralist is happy to live in a society in which different groups worship different gods. Since different religions are generally associated with different cultures, pluralism is close to multiculturalism.

Polytheism

A polytheist is someone who believes in the existence of many gods.

Positivism

The belief that only observable phenomena and what they tell us are real. Experience is thereby elevated to prime importance.

Postmodernism

A reaction to the failure of modernism to make people happy. Postmodernism is pessimistic and solipsistic; its creed, stemming from the 1960s, is 'Do your own thing' and it claims that no way exists, even in principle, of judging between people, or between claims to truth – the winner is simply the one who shouts loudest and fools the most people.

Pragmatism

The principle that the value of actions are based on practical achievement and success.

Rationalism

The idea that human reason is the ultimate arbiter of truth. Through its advocacy of absolute scientific laws, rationalism denies the supernatural.

Relativism

The belief that there are no absolutes, so that everything is relative and therefore a matter of personal taste. Serious relativists

claim that good and evil are illusions.

Secularism

Secularism places its belief in the world. *Secularisation* is a process in which a civilisation moves from a theistic worldview to a humanist one. This has happened in Western Europe and its spiritual colonies (America, Australia etc) over the last 200 years.

Solipsism

The belief that "My self is the only ultimate reality".

Syncretism

A syncretist will acknowledge as many gods as he encounters and fit them into his belief system.

Theism

The belief in a God supernaturally revealed and sustaining a personal relation to his creation.

Utilitarianism

The belief that the greatest good of the greatest number should determine all decisions. Denies the role of the heart in decision-making, and is of little use since 'good' cannot be measured in most human situations.

