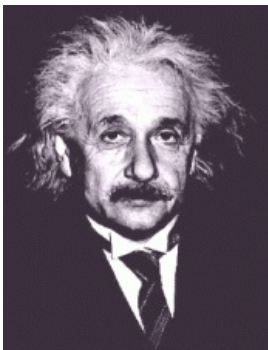


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Albert Einstein's God — The "Product of Human Weaknesses"

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A letter from Albert Einstein to philosopher Eric Gutkind is to be auctioned today at Bloomsbury Auctions in London. The letter — hidden within a private collection for a half-century — is making news as evidence of Einstein's dismissal of belief in God.

For decades, Einstein has been claimed by both atheists and theists. The scientist was given to rather anecdotal statements about religion and belief in God, and these statements are easily taken out of context. Given Einstein's cultural and intellectual stature, both sides in this great debate have assumed that Einstein's agreement would lend intellectual credibility to their argument.

Some theists (including an unfortunate number of Evangelicals) have seized upon some of Einstein's statements to claim that he was a theist. When Einstein remarked that God "does not throw dice," some claimed that this was evidence of theism and belief in God. When Einstein quipped that "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind," others claimed that this was evidence of Einstein's insistence that some form of religious belief is necessary to science.

Atheists, on the other hand, had plenty of evidence upon which to draw. The data of Einstein's life and the contours of his thought certainly indicate that Einstein held no belief in a personal God who acted as a moral agent.

The letter to Eric Gutkind includes more explicit statements by Einstein, written in the year before his death.

The Guardian [London] published selections from the letter, including this paragraph:

... The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this. These subtilised interpretations are highly manifold according to their nature and have almost nothing to do with the original text. For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. And the Jewish people to whom I gladly belong and with whose mentality I have a deep affinity have no different quality for me than all other people. As far as my experience goes, they are also no better than other human groups, although they are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power. Otherwise I cannot see anything 'chosen' about them.

Einstein's language is very clear. God is dismissed as "nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses" — a statement hauntingly like the verdict of Friedrich Nietzsche. This letter helps to substantiate what other statements also indicate. Einstein was not an atheist in the sense that he wanted to deny any force beyond what science could explain. On the other hand, he was an atheist in the sense that he clearly rejected theism and belief in any personal God.

Born to a Jewish family, Einstein once wrote of his loss of faith: "Through the reading of popular scientific books, I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively

fanatic orgy of freethinking coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state through lies, it was a crushing impression.”

In his letter to Gutkind, Einstein expressed his belief that the Bible is a “collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish.”

An individual’s thought can easily (even almost necessarily) change over a lifetime. The emergence of the Gutkind letter, written just a year before Einstein’s death, seems to provide ample evidence that the scientist’s verdict about the Bible did not change.

Before fleeing Germany as World War II approached, Einstein explained his concept of religion:

“Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in fact, religious.”

By that definition, most atheists are “in fact, religious.” There is no room in this definition for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — nor for Jesus Christ. Like many other unbelievers, Einstein respected the morals of Jesus, but rejected any thought of deity. He came to be proud of his Jewish ethnic identity, but rejected any claim that the Jews are a chosen people.

The emergence of the letter from Albert Einstein to Eric Gutkind goes a long way toward setting the record straight. Evangelical Christians are prone to over-excitement when any famous person, living or dead, is claimed as a believer in God. This is not an attractive habit, and it often leads to intellectual embarrassment. The truth of the Gospel and the reality of the self-revealing God are not enhanced by vague expressions of a non-theistic spirituality or a sense of nothing more than an inexplicable sense of meaning in the cosmos.

Beyond this, the witness of an honest Christian is far more powerful than a listing of the rich, intelligent, and powerful who may or may not have believed in some kind of God. Attempts to claim Einstein for theism reveal a deep intellectual insecurity.

The Einstein/Gutkind letter is expected to bring a sale price well into the thousands of dollars. It is then likely to disappear into yet another private collection. Its unexpected emergence in these days does present an opportunity to clarify Einstein’s real beliefs.

In the end, it is better to see Einstein, not as a believer of sorts, but as an atheist of sorts. Belief in God was simply childish, he asserted. Einstein believed in awe and wonder, but not in God.

See coverage from *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *Newsweek*, and *Christianity Today*.

The Einstein quote beginning “try and penetrate” is found in *Einstein: His Life and Universe* by Walter Isaacson, pages 384-385. The quotation that begins “through the reading” is found on page 20.

