

Do you believe in God?

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Wow! This is one of the biggies and I get asked it all the time. It has to do with the fact that I rarely use the word "god" but, because I'm a minister, people expect me to, and not just once in a while. For some, it would be okay if I used it in every sentence. Now, people don't really ask me if I believe in nematodes although the name of the teeny-tiny worm-things does not regularly enter my vocabulary either. Perhaps, were I a scientist working in the nematode field and I didn't use the word, people might wonder. It might just be, however, that, were I that scientist and everyone knew my field was nematodes that I wouldn't need to actually say the word very much at all. Indeed, my research would very likely take people to levels of understanding and awareness about nematodes that the simple word "nematode" just could not convey. It would very likely fall to me to find ways to describe my findings, my experiences of nematodes, and whatever thesis I might have about them so that my work could be understood. Within the scientific community, I might find a technical language with which I could share my findings, exchange ideas, and integrate previous knowledge with my own new discoveries. Now, every field of science, of course, has its own language and if you don't understand it, you just don't understand the science. Unless, of course, someone takes the time to explain it all in layman's terms..... That just about perfectly explains why I don't use the word "god" anymore. Over the course of millennia, humans have understood God, with a capital "g," to mean, pretty much, a theistic being that has characteristics that give it power over humanity in some way. Within the church, however, over the past few decades it has become as difficult to understand as scientific technical terms used indiscriminately in different contexts. No longer having a universally understood definition, it is impossible to tell what one person means when they use it in one context and whether that is different from how another person might use it in a different context. Indeed, in different Christian communities, even in the same community, people have developed wildly divergent understandings; god can mean everything from that theistic being it once described to the feeling we have when our parents or our partners or our children act in ways that make our hearts just want to burst with joy. Theistically, it can mean the guy with the white beard, or an amorphous spirit that resides within us all and which can yet act autonomously apart from us. Non-theistically, it can be a collection of values chosen by a community to guide it in right living or the void of silence into which one can enter to come to oneness with oneself and, through that, with the universe. There is no single meaning for the word god. In other words, what do you mean when you ask me if I believe in god? Without knowing what you mean by that word, I simply can't answer you. I could say "no," but I'd be guessing at what you mean. I could say "yes," but without explaining to you what I mean by god, my answer would mean nothing. It's interesting then that, when most people answer that question, they don't ask the inquirer what she or he means by it and, when most people answer, they simply say "yes." Now you have to wonder... what on earth do they mean by that?