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Atheism

“ We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further. ”

—Richard Dawkins^[1]

Atheism is the absence of belief in the existence of [gods](#). The word stems from the Greek *a-* meaning "without", and *theos* meaning "god". *Theos* includes the Abrahamic [YHWH\(s\)](#), Zeus, the [Flying Spaghetti Monster](#), and every other deity from A to Z^[2] (and 0-9, !, ", #, \$ or any other character, obviously). For the definition of atheism, the terms "God" and "a god" are used interchangeably as there is no difference between a [monotheistic](#) deity and a pantheon of [polytheistic](#) deities when it comes to complete disbelief in them. This also has the deliberate intent of ignoring the privileged position [Yahweh](#) has held in English grammar. Most [atheists](#) also do not believe in anything [supernatural](#) or [paranormal](#).

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The Atheist's Guide To Atheism



Key concepts

- [Atheism](#)
- [Agnosticism](#)
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- [FAQ for new atheists](#)

More about atheism

- [How to Persuade an Atheist to Become Christian](#)
- [Julia Sweeney](#)
- [Letter to a Christian Nation](#)
- [Msotheism](#)
- [Pascal's wager](#)

Notable atheists

- [Alan Turing](#)
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- [H.L. Mencken](#)
- [Internet Infidels](#)
- [Rhawn Joseph](#)

v - t - e

Atheism throughout history [edit]

“ *Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it, too?* ”

—Douglas Adams^[3]

There has been a long history of rational people who have not accepted superstitious or magical explanations of natural phenomena and who have felt that "gods" are not necessary for the working of the world. The Eastern philosophy of Buddhism is broadly atheistic, explicitly eschewing the notion of a creation myth. In the Western world, there have been atheists almost as

long as there has been philosophy and writing. Some of the most famous thinkers of the ancient world have been critical of belief in deities or eschewed religion entirely - many favouring **logic** and **rationality** to inform their lives and their actions, rather than religious texts. Democritus, who originally conceived of the **atom**, **hypothesized** a world without **magic** holding it together. Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, preceded **Marx** when he called religion a tool to control the masses.

Perhaps the best example of an explicitly atheistic ancient philosophy is the **Carvaka** school of thought, which originated in India in the first millennium BCE. The Carvakas posited a materialistic universe, rejected the idea of an afterlife, and emphasized the need to enjoy this life.^[6]

Modern atheism in the Western world can be traced to the **Age of Enlightenment**. Important thinkers of that era who were atheists include **Baron d'Holbach** and **Denis Diderot**. The Scottish philosopher **David Hume**, though not explicitly avowing atheism, wrote critical essays on religions and religious beliefs (his most famous being a critique of belief in miracles), and posited naturalistic explanations for the origins of religion in **The Natural History of Religion** as well as criticizing traditional arguments for the existence of God in **Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion**.

Not until recently, however, did the term known as "atheism" begin to carry its current connotation. In an increasing number of countries around the world it is a neutral or unimportant label. The nation of **New Zealand**, for example, has thrice elected an **agnostic** woman (Helen Clark) as Prime Minister, followed by its current agnostic leader (John Key). Several Prime Ministers of the UK have been atheists, including Clement Attlee, and the current deputy PM, Nick Clegg. Also, the former Prime Minister of Australia, **Julia Gillard**, is openly atheist, and at least one other former Australian PM was atheist. However, in more religious areas such as the **United States** or **Saudi Arabia** the term carries a heavy stigma. Indeed, prejudice against atheists is so high in the United States that one study found that they are America's most distrusted minority.^[7]

The reason for such attitudes towards atheists in these nations is unclear. Firstly, there is no stated creed with which to disagree (except perhaps for "strong" atheists, whose only belief is that there are no gods). Nor are atheists generally organized into lobbies or interest groups or political action committees (at least none that wield massive power), unlike the many groups that lobby on behalf of various religions. And yet an atheist would be the least likely to be elected **President of the United States**. According to the American Values Survey, about 67% of all voters would be uncomfortable with an atheist president, and no other group — including **Mormons**, **African Americans**, and **homosexuals** — would lose so much of the potential vote based on one single trait alone.^{[8][9]} One potential reason for this is that in the United States, **Christian** groups have managed to push and implant the concept that without religion there can be no morality - often playing to people's needs for absolutes and written rules - **absolute morality** is presented as something inherently true and achievable only by believers.

Misconceptions about atheists

[[edit](#)]

The mistrust of atheism is often accompanied by **snarl words**, **straw man** arguments and various other myths and legends in order to denigrate the idea of disbelief in established gods. Some misconceptions about atheism should be addressed:

Atheism as an organized religion

[[edit](#)]

“ Atheism is a religion in the same way as 'off' is a **television** station. ”
—Ben Ererson

One of the widest misconceptions, often used as a strong criticism, is that atheism is a **religion**. However, while there are **secular religions**, atheism is most commonly defined as "no religion." To expand the definition of "religion" to include atheism would thus destroy any use the word "religion" would have in describing anything. It is quite often pointed out that if atheism is a religion it would be akin to stating that the act of not collecting stamps is a hobby, or that being unemployed is an occupation. Following from this, atheists *do not* worship **Charles Darwin** or any other individual. Although some think that atheism *requires* evolution to be a complete worldview,^[10] there is no worship of *anything* or *anyone* in atheism, and **acceptance of evolution isn't exclusive to atheists** - for that matter there is no necessity for an atheist to accept the evidence for evolution. By definition, if atheists worshiped Darwin as a **supernatural entity**, they wouldn't be atheists.

A new movement of atheist churches appears to be developing (such as **Sunday Assembly**), but what they do is not worship; rather, they are places where like-minded people get together on Sunday mornings to have fun, celebrate life and whatever. This is a relatively new phenomenon, and its prospects for the future are unclear.^[11]

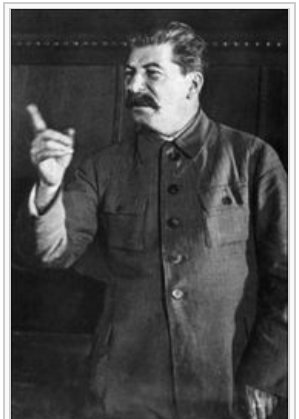
Atheists, as a whole, are *not* a unified group, so accusation that "atheists" are doing x, y and z hold little water. In fact, a disaffection with organized religion, and the potential for **groupthink**, is what causes many believers to abandon faith and come out as atheists. It doesn't follow that such individuals would happily join another organised group. Debate within the atheistic community is robust - debates even about whether there is even an "atheistic community" at all, for instance - and the fact that this debate exists presupposes no dogmatic mandate from an organized group. It does follow from this lack of organisation that there is no atheist equivalent of the **Bible**, **Koran**, or other holy text. There are, of course, atheist writings, but one does not need to adhere to opinions held by **Friedrich Nietzsche**, **Richard Dawkins** or **Christopher Hitchens** to be considered an atheist. Some atheists will actively oppose what these kind of authors do and say. In fact, some atheists wish they could believe.^[12]

Fundamentalist views of atheism

[[edit](#)]



Some people think this is the symbol for atheism^[4] Wikipedia's "atheism project" did use it as a logo, but since replaced it with something more sensible.^[5]



Fundamentalist Christians have a penchant for revising history to suggest that the bad acts of atheists are due to lack of belief in a god (usually the Christian **God**). Attempts by fundamentalist Christians to associate **Hitler**, **Stalin**, and any number of terrible characters with atheism indulge the **association fallacy** and would be laughably trivial were the smear not so effective at influencing **uncritical thinkers**.

Fundamentalists will often denigrate atheists on the grounds that they "hate God." This, however, makes no sense. Atheists do not deny the existence of the Christian God because they "hate God" or simply "want to live in sin", because atheists simply do not believe in *any* of these things. Thus hating god(s) makes as much sense as someone who doesn't believe in Santa Claus blaming him for not bringing them any Christmas presents. In line with the varied specific beliefs of atheists in the world, some may actually wish a god did exist (but can't reconcile this with what they observe, such as the [problem of evil](#)), some would very much dislike the god portrayed in the Bible and don't believe such a thing could exist, some [simply do not care](#), and many will fall somewhere in between these definitions.

Morality is one of the larger issues facing the world, and religious fundamentalists believe that they have the monopoly on explaining, and deciding, moral judgments. Contrary to the claims of fundamentalists, "no gods" *does not* equal "no morality." There are strong [humanistic](#), cultural, and genetic rationales for the existence of morality and ethical behaviour, and many people, not just atheists, recognize this fact.

In the US, where criticism of atheism is high, it often works well for politicians and evangelists to compare atheism to the "evils" of [communism](#), or even Communism itself. These "evils" are not inextricably fused with the values of atheism in reality. Although most orthodox Marxists are atheists (Marxism treats religion as a "[false consciousness](#)" that needs to be eliminated), the atrocities wrought by [Stalin](#) and others were not on account of their being atheists, but on account of their being totalitarians and authoritarians. Additionally, there have been many *anti*-communists who were atheists or agnostics, such as [Ayn Rand](#) and the computer pioneer John von Neumann.

Misconceptions of definition

[edit]

Atheism and [agnosticism](#) are not entirely mutually exclusive, and atheists are not "actually agnostic because no one can ever know whether God exists." This is a highly contested point among religious believers and atheistic philosophers alike, as most, if not all, thinking atheists would happily change their minds given the right evidence, and thus could be considered "agnostic" in this sense. However, this conflates the ideas of belief and knowledge. Atheism is a statement of a lack of *belief*, and not a lack of *knowledge* - which is often accepted on all sides of the theistic debate. Atheism takes the position that it is [rational](#) to *think* that gods don't exist, based on logic and lack of evidence. Agnostics, on the other hand, state that the lack of knowledge cannot inform their opinion at all. There are agnostic atheists, who can be either weak or strong. It is at least logically possible for a theist to be an agnostic (e.g., "*I believe in a pantheon of lobsterish zoomorphic deities, but cannot prove this with evidence, and acknowledge and embrace that my belief is rooted in faith*")—but it is markedly difficult to find anyone who will fess up to such a position.

Why people become disaffected with religion

[edit]

Not all atheists are "disaffected with religion" - some were just never raised with or indoctrinated with religious beliefs in the first place. Hence a substantial number have nothing to become disaffected with. However, in areas where religious belief is essentially taken as normal, there is a high chance that a person will have been religious before "coming out" as an atheist. As the term "atheist" only really means something in the context of ubiquitous religious belief, being disaffected or unconvinced by religion is certainly a factor in most, if not all, people who declare themselves as an atheist. As has been said previously, there is debate in the atheist community and not *all* atheists would agree with *all* of these reasons or even consider them relevant to atheism.

One of the major intellectual issues regarding disenchantment with religion is the fact that most world religions insist that all other faiths are wrong. While some moderate believers may like to take a stance that "all religions are right, they're just different interpretations", it's undeniable that [heresy](#) and [apostasy](#) are looked down upon very harshly. This suggests the possibility that *no religion is right*, and further suggests that, because the vast majority of believers in any [faith](#) are born into it, being a member of the "correct" group or "the elect" is merely an accident of birth. There is also historical evidence that organized religion, while professing a peaceful moral code, is often the basis for exclusion and war as well as a method to motivate people in political conflicts. The enmity among different religions and even among [sects](#) within the same religion is also an indication of this.

Other reasons may be more directly to do with a religion or its specifics - namely (1) the evils that the concept of religion has produced over the ages, (2) the [hypocrisy](#) of professed believers and religious leaders who exhort their followers to help the poor, love their neighbors and behave morally but become wealthy through donations to the church and carry love for certain neighbors to an immoral extreme, and (3) the contradiction between talk of a loving god and a world in which children starve to death and innocent people are [tortured](#). Issues with religion may arise due to the nature of fundamentalists - insisting that their holy texts are *literally* true. This leads to attempts by such fundamentalists to undermine education by censoring scientific knowledge that seems to contradict their beliefs. [Intelligent design](#) is a prominent case of this (see [Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District](#)). Often this doesn't sit well with moderate believers and especially those who may be on the verge of losing any faith, especially when the evidence provided by daily experience suggests that there are no events that cannot be explained by [common sense](#) and [scientific study](#).

Other issues that atheists have with religion involve the characteristics of supposed gods. Atheists sometimes view the idea that a supreme all-knowing deity would have the narcissistic need to be worshiped, and would [punish](#) anyone for worshipping a different god (or none at all), to be absurd.

Lastly, formerly religious atheists often report to have had their belief system unsettled by lack of evidence supporting the notion of the supernatural.

Clergy who turn atheist

[edit]

“ Nobody knows for sure how many clergy members are secretly atheists (or are secretly on the fence, with serious doubts about their religion). But almost everyone I've spoken with in Clergy Project strongly suspects that the numbers are high. ”

— Greta Christina^[13]

Studying religion in depth during training for clerical work can lead a person to examine religious ideas [critically](#). The study of

[Christian theology](#) will include the whole of the [Bible](#), and include historical background which can lead to rational doubt. ^[14] ^[15]

In 2011, the [Freedom From Religion Foundation](#) and the [Richard Dawkins](#) Foundation for Science and Reason launched a confidential support group for clergy who have lost their faith, The [Clergy Project](#) and by December 2012 the group had almost 400 members. One of the founders of Clergy Project is Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, who was an evangelical preacher for nineteen years before becoming an atheist.^[16] Former Methodist pastor, Teresa MacBain received online support from Clergy Project before coming out as an atheist dramatically at an atheist convention in spring 2012. She is now Public Relations Director of [American Atheists](#).^[17]

[Freethought](#) Blogger Greta Christina articulates a possible effect of clergy openly leaving Christianity on their parishioner's beliefs. The more traditional position of clergy, is that they are somehow endowed with answers to all questions of faith. If these trained religious authorities start saying they have no answers to normal "Crisis of Faith", even more if some of them suggest the most reasonable answer is atheism, lay Christians will find continuing with their belief more difficult. ^[18] It is worth noting, however, that modern clergy trained in most US or UK universities are discouraged from claiming to be exempt from such crises of faith, and to encourage people to share a "journey of spiritual discovery". Perhaps atheism must simply be accepted as an outcome of that endeavor .

Types of atheism

[edit]

There are many ways to describe different types of atheism and some of these are explained below. These shouldn't be read as factions or sects within atheism in the same way as sects within religion, Protestant/Catholicism in Christianity, Sunni/Shiite in Islam, and their multiple sub-groups for example. One does not "join" a group of implicit atheists. Instead of being sects that dictate people's beliefs, these should be taken as models to, at least roughly, describe people's beliefs and their attitudes towards belief itself. There are many similarities, all of which are included in the blanket term "atheist." However - as is typical in atheist thought - not all atheists consider these divisions particularly relevant worthwhile or meaningful.



The commonality among these various modes of atheism is the statement that no god or gods created natural phenomena such as the existence of [life](#) or the [universe](#). Instead, these are usually explained through [science](#), specifically without resort to [supernatural](#) explanations. Morality in atheism is also not based on religious precepts such as divine commandments or revelation through a holy text - many alternative philosophies exist to derive or explain morality, such as [humanism](#).

Implicit vs. explicit atheism

[edit]

Implicit atheism

[edit]

Implicit atheism is simply the state of not believing in any gods, simply out of a lack of considering the question. All implicit atheists are weak or pragmatic atheists.

Explicit atheism

[edit]

Explicit atheism is a conscious *rejection*, either of the belief in gods or of their existence. Explicit atheists can be weak or strong atheists, but all strong atheists are explicit atheists.

Weak vs. strong atheism

[edit]

Weak atheism

[edit]

Weak atheism (sometimes equated with "**pragmatic atheism**" or "negative atheism") describes the state of living as if no gods exist. It does not require an absolute statement of God's non-existence. The argument is based on the fact that as there is no evidence that gods, [spatial teapots](#) or [fairies](#) exist, we have no reason to believe in them. This argument could also be classified as extreme [agnosticism](#), or "agnostic atheism" - as it is an acknowledgment of the lack of evidence but acting as if there were no gods.

Pragmatic atheists however are frequently reluctant to make outright statements like "Gods (or fairies) do not exist", because of the great difficulties involved in proving the absolute non-existence of anything - the idea that nothing can be proved is held in the philosophy of [pyrrhonism](#). Consequently many pragmatic atheists would argue that the [burden of proof](#) does not lie with them to provide evidence against the [extraordinary concept](#) that gods exist. They would argue that it is up to the supporters of various religions to provide evidence for the existence of their own deities, and that no argument is necessary on the atheist's part.

[Christopher Hitchens](#) put it another way when he said: "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence."

Strong atheism

[edit]

Strong atheism (sometimes equated with "**theoretical atheism**") makes an *explicit statement* against the existence of gods. Strong atheists would disagree with weak atheists about the inability to disprove the existence of gods. Strong atheism specifically combats religious beliefs and other arguments for belief in some god (or gods), such as [Pascal's Wager](#), and [argument from design](#). These arguments tend to be geared toward demonstrating that the concept of god is logically inconsistent or incoherent in order to actively disprove the existence of a god.^[19] [Theological noncognitivism](#), which asserts the meaninglessness of religious language, is an argument commonly invoked by strong atheists.^[20] In contrast, weak atheist arguments tend to concentrate on the evidence (or lack thereof) for god, while strong atheist arguments tend to concentrate on making a positive case for the non-existence of god.

Apatheism

[edit]

See the main article on this topic: [Apatheism](#)

An apatheist has no interest in accepting or denying claims that a god or gods exist or do not exist. An apatheist considers the very question of the existence or non-existence of gods or other supernatural beings to be irrelevant and not worth consideration under any circumstances.

In short: they simply don't care. (Well, OK, they care enough to give themselves a name - so that people explicitly know what it is they don't care anything about. But that's it.)

Antitheism

[edit]

See the main article on this topic: [Antitheism](#)

Antitheism adds to a disbelief in gods the position that any adherence to a different position — any belief in gods — is harmful or undesirable, either to the adherent or to society. As justification the antitheist will often point to the incompatibility of religion-based morality with modern humanistic values, or to the atrocities and bloodshed wrought by religion and by religious wars.

Types of arguments for atheism

[edit]

“ *We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing all-powerful God, who creates faulty Humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes.* ”

—Eugene Wesley Roddenberry

Burden of proof

[edit]

Arguments related to the burden of proof deal with whether atheists must disprove theism or theists must prove theism. Conventionally, the [burden of proof](#) lies with someone proposing a positive idea - or as [Karl Popper](#) fans would put it, those who are proposing something [falsifiable](#). By this standard, atheists have no need to prove anything, and just need to render arguments *for* the existence of God as non-compelling. However, the ubiquity of religion in society and history have often shifted the burden of proof to atheists, who must subsequently prove a negative. Assuming that God exists is known as [presuppositionalism](#) and has always been a key tenet of Christian apologetics but is usually rejected by more sensible scholars. The [absurdity](#) of being asked to prove a negative is demonstrated in [Bertrand Russell's teapot thought experiment](#) - where no matter how hard you look, you can't thoroughly disprove the belief that a teapot is out there in space, orbiting the sun somewhere between Earth and Mars. This sort of presuppositional thinking is illogical, so asking an atheist to disprove God is an unreasonable request.

[Occam's razor](#) can also be invoked as a guide to making the fewest assumptions, and assuming God exists *a priori* is a major assumption that should be avoided. Combining these thoughts to lay the burden of proof on theists indicates that without supporting evidence, the [default position](#) on God must be either weak-ish atheism or [agnosticism](#) rather than theism. Proponents of atheism argue that the burden of proof has not been met by those proposing that a god exists, let alone the specific gods described by major religions.

Logical

[edit]

Logical arguments try to show that God cannot possibly exist (at least as described). Barring any [escape hatch](#) arguments like [Goddidit](#), some properties of God are not compatible with each other or known facts about the world, and thus a creator-god cannot be a logically consistent and existent entity. These arguments are heavily dependent on the use of common descriptions of the Abrahamic God as a target; things such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and omnibenevolence. As a result, they are not as useful in trying to refute the claims of, say, [Neopaganism](#), and are also vulnerable to the tactic of [moving the goalposts](#) by changing the descriptions of God.

The [omnipotence paradox](#) postulates that true omnipotence is not logically possible or not compatible with omniscience. This is primarily a logical argument based on the general question of whether an omnipotent being could limit its own power - if yes, it would cease to be omnipotent, if no, it wouldn't be omnipotent. Hence the paradox that shows, through contradiction, that God cannot exist as usually described.

Other logical arguments try to prove that god is not compatible with our scientific knowledge of reality. The [Problem of evil](#) states that a good god wouldn't permit gratuitous evil, yet such evil occurs, so a good god does not exist.^[21] The [argument from design](#) is often given as proof of a creator, but it raise the following logical question: if the world is so complex that it must have had a creator, then the creator must be at least as complex and must therefore have a creator, and this would have to have had a more complex creator *ad infinitum*.

While believers hasten to point out that their gods don't need to follow logic, let alone the known laws of physics, this is really a case of [special pleading](#) and doesn't so much prove anything itself. Atheists therefore tend to reject these counters to the logical arguments as they mostly [beg the question](#) of a creator's existence and, very arbitrarily, plead that a creator can be exempt from the same logic that was used to "prove" its existence.

Evidential

[edit]

At the root of the worldview of most atheists is evidence, and atheists point out that sufficient evidence for the existence of gods is currently very lacking, and thus there is no reason to believe in them. Evidential arguments are less ambitious than logical arguments because, rather than proving that there is reason *not* to believe in a god, they prove that there is no reason *to* believe in a god (See [Burden of proof](#) above). It is important to remember that what constitutes *sufficient* evidence can be quite subjective, although [rationalism](#) and [science](#) do offer some standardization. Various "holy books" exist that testify to the existence of gods, and claim that alleged miracles and personal experiences all constitute evidence in favor of the existence of a god character of some sort. However, atheists reject these as insufficient because the naturalistic explanations behind them (tracing authors of the holy texts, psychological experiments, and scientific experiments to explain experiences, and so on) are more plausible - indeed, the very existence of plausible naturalistic explanations renders the *supernatural* explanations obsolete. Atheists often cite evidence that processes attributed to a god might also occur naturally as evidential arguments. If [evolution](#)

and the [big bang](#) are true, then why would a creator god have needed them?^[22] [Occam's razor](#) makes theistic explanations less compelling.

Experiential

[edit]

Many atheists argue, in similar vein to the born-again Christian who "just knows" that God exists, that the day-to-day experience of the atheist demonstrates quite clearly that God does not. This is because they have [an image](#) in their heads of what this "God" would have to look like, viz., an entity in the vein of the God of the Old Testament who runs around zapping entire cities, turning people into pillars of salt, and generally answering people's prayers in flashes of fire and brimstone.

What god is being denied?

[edit]

Tied up with some of the more awkward aspects of defining the term "atheist" is the question of what god, or type of god, is being denied. This is particularly important for those who claim that atheism is supported by evidence (more specifically, the *lack of evidence* for a theistic case).

If the god being denied is the interventionist God, which most [theists](#) hold to exist, then the argument against the existence of this being is easy; the lack of any demonstrable interventions demonstrates the god's lack of existence. In this case, absence of evidence is evidence of absence. However, if the god being denied is of a less interventionist, or [deist](#) type, god, then the above argument regarding evidence doesn't work. Indeed, the only possible "evidence" for a deist god is the very existence of the universe, and most sane people don't tend to deny the universe exists. On the other hand as said "evidence" is simply asserted and isn't testable in any way, it is a lot less than wholly convincing and we return to "What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence."

Whether atheism also requires a person to disbelieve in all other forms of [magic](#), or [ghosts](#), or [psychic](#) powers is also a question. These are not "gods" in the conventional sense at all, but they are still supernatural entities or powers. More "hardline" atheists would insist that disbelief in all things supernatural is mandatory for the label of "atheist." They would argue that this follows from the fact that atheism is a [rational](#) position; and that therefore atheists should take rational positions on other matters also. What does and what does not constitute a "god" in the case of atheism can often be very subjective; the definition could be restricted to monotheistic "creator" gods, or expanded to include all supernatural entities, or used to describe only things that are worshipped or idolised. The variables that arise when trying to perfectly codify "atheism" are immense, and this is fitting with its position as specifically a *lack* of belief.

However, atheism only makes sense in the context of the ubiquity of religion and theistic belief worldwide. If religions didn't exist, atheism wouldn't exist and any discussion of the subject would be inherently meaningless - the world doesn't feature books, internet debates and billboard campaigns saying that it's fine to disbelieve in Bertrand Russell's celestial teapot precisely because few, if any, people believe in the teapot. Therefore a working, albeit still slightly subjective, definition of what constitutes a "god" can be developed based on the beliefs of self-declared religions of the world. As a [thought experiment](#) we can conceive of a religion that achieves literal overnight success by promoting some god, Athkel,^[23] who will become a worldwide phenomenon tomorrow. An atheist would simply not believe in Athkel tomorrow, despite the fact they had no belief in him/her yesterday because it is a self defined religious deity.

Opposition to the term "atheism"

[edit]

“ In fact, "atheism" is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a "non-astrologer" or a "non-chemist." We do not have words for people who doubt that Elms is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs. ”

—Sam Harris^[25]



One difficulty with the term "atheism" is that it defines what its adherents *do not* believe in, rather than in what they *do* believe in. The lack of positive statements of belief has led to the fact that there is really no overarching organisation that speaks for atheists (some would regard this as a good thing, keeping atheism from becoming an organised religion) and has led to the comparison that organising atheists is like "herding cats", i.e., impossible. It is possible that the *only* thing which does really unite atheists is a lack of belief in gods; thus an overarching organisation to represent them would be physically impossible.

Primarily because of the prevalence of extreme discrimination against atheists, people have tried to come up with more positive terms or campaigns to get the godless philosophy noticed and respected. This allows atheists to feel more united and happy with their beliefs (or *lack* of), but has also led to organisations that will help them in situations, such as legal cases, where individuals couldn't do it on their own. The most prominent examples:

- The "[Brights Movement](#)" describes itself as being composed of people with a naturalistic world-view.
- [Naturalist](#) is the preferred term used by A. C. Grayling and others. Grayling argues that a statement such as "I believe in naturalistic explanations" has the advantage of being a positive statement about what is believed and also does not narrowly define the speaker in terms of one particular lack of belief.
- [Freethinker](#) is another term meaning something similar; the philosophy behind it is known as "freethought."

To date, none of these alternative descriptions seems to have taken hold a great deal and the term of choice for most people remains "atheist." "Freethinker" is probably the term with most support, as it dates back at least to the 19th Century. "Naturalism" may be the second most popular, although the name may lead people to confuse it with [naturism](#) or with some kind of eco-hippy ideal. "Bright" is the most recent term invented, and as a result is currently the most controversial and divisive. Supporters of the Brights movement see it as a positive and constructive redefinition (on par with the re-branding of homosexuality with the word "gay", which until then primarily meant "happy" or "joyous") while its detractors see it as nothing more than a shameless attempt to turn atheism into an organized religion, and the use of "bright" as a cynical attempt to appear more intellectual.

In some contexts words such as "rationalist" and "skeptic" may also be [code words](#) for "atheist." Although not all atheists need to be rationalists, and not all rationalists need to be atheists, the connection is more in the *method* a person uses to derive their beliefs rather than what their beliefs actually are.

Some who have expressed criticism to religion, among them [Richard Dawkins](#), have pointed out that the word *atheism* enforces theism as a [social norm](#), as there are no established terms for people who do not believe in other supernatural phenomena (*a-fairyst* for people who do not believe in [fairies](#), etc).

Religious views of atheism

[[edit](#)]

With the existence of deities being central belief of almost all religious systems, it is not surprising that atheism is seen as more threatening than competing belief systems, regardless of how different they may be. This often manifests in the statement that "[freedom of religion](#)" doesn't include freedom *from* religion. It is also important for theists that the political hierarchy, the priesthood, should do their utmost to discourage dissent - as true believers make better tithe givers. Most religious codes are more than a bit irritated with those who do not believe. The Bible, for example, includes clear [ad hominem](#) attacks on non-believers, *The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."* ([Psalm 14:1](#) and [Psalm 53:1](#)), while the penalty for [apostasy](#) in Islamic law is death - and this is still endorsed today. One author has proposed a correction to Psalm 53, as follows:^[26]

The fool hath said in his heart, "I know there is a God, and just one God. I know his name, I know his mind and his plans for me. I have a personal relationship with God's son. I know where we came from and what happens after we die. I know if I merely believe in God I shall live forever in paradise. And all I have to do is pray to God, and all my wishes will come true."

The increased public visibility of atheism - what some commentators call the "[New Atheism](#)", seen in the popularity of books like *The God Delusion* - has brought renewed energy to the debate between believers and non-believers.^[27] As part of that debate, some believers have put considerable effort into trying to stop what they think of as the "irresponsible" promotion of atheism. Their efforts range from material that has academic pretensions to arguments that are plainly abusive, focusing on "smacking" atheists with [PRATT](#) arguments regarding how great the Bible isn't is - and, of course, a heavy bias towards their *own* religion being true.^[28] What these arguments tend to have in common is that they are less about providing arguments *for* religious belief and more about keeping atheists quiet, with questions such as "[don't you have anything better to do than talk about the God you don't believe in?](#)" or arguing that "[faith is better than reason so shut up](#)".^[29] It's not entirely unexpected that this would be the thrusts of several anti-atheist arguments - after all, according to several Christians in influential positions, mere knowledge that atheism exists can be dangerous.^[30]

Atheistic view of the Bible

[[edit](#)]

Atheists may view the [Bible](#) and other religious works as literature, fiction, [mythology](#), epic, philosophy, *agit-prop*, irrelevant, [history](#), or various combinations thereof. Many atheists may find the book repulsively ignorant and primitive, while other atheists may find inspiration from certain passages even though they don't believe in the supernatural events and miracles mentioned in the Bible. Many atheists see religious works as interesting historical records of the myths and beliefs of humanity. By definition *atheists do not believe any religious text to be divinely inspired truth*. In other words, "Dude, it's just a book" (or, in fact, a somewhat random collection of different books).

There are several types of evidence to support the idea that "it's just a book." Textual analysis of the various books of the Bible reveals vastly differing writing styles among the authors of the individual books of the Old and New Testaments, suggesting that these works represent many different (human) voices, and not a sole, divinely inspired voice. The existence of Apocrypha, writings dating from the time of Bible that were not included into official canon by Jews or Christians (and peppered with mystical events such as encounters with angels, demons, and dragons), further suggests that "divine authorship" is not a reliable claim. Within Christianity, there are even differences among sects regarding which books are Apocrypha and which are included in the Bible, or which are included under the heading "Apocrypha," indicating that they constitute holy writings but are not meant to be taken as literally as the other books. The Book of Tobit, for example, is included in the Catholic Bible but considered Apocrypha by Protestants and wholly absent from the Jewish Bible.

Another problem with the "divine authorship" of the Bible is the existence of texts that pre-date it but contain significant similarities to certain Biblical stories. The best-known among these is the [flood story](#), found in numerous versions in texts from across the ancient Middle-East, including the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, which bears textual similarities with the Biblical account. Another such story with apparent Babylonian origin is that of the Tower of Babel. It has been suggested that some of these stories were appropriated by the Jews during the Babylonian Exile.

Studies of the history of the Bible, although not undertaken with the intent of disproving it (in fact, many Biblical historians set out to prove the Bible's veracity), shed light on the Bible's nature as a set of historical documents, ones which were written by humans and affected by the cultural circumstances surrounding their creation. It should be noted that this type of rational discourse neither proves nor requires an atheistic worldview: one can believe that the Bible is not the infallible word of God either because one adheres to a non-Judeo-Christian religion or because one is a Christian or Jew but not a Biblical literalist. These criticisms of Biblical "truth" serve mainly to counter the arguments of fundamentalists, who are among Atheism's most vociferous critics.

Atheism and American bigotry

[[edit](#)]

“ *I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.* ”

—George H.W. Bush^[31]

Research in the American Sociological Review finds that atheists are the group that Americans least relate to for shared vision

or want to have marry into their family. ^[32]

Group in Question	This Group Does Not at All Agree with My Vision of American Society:	I Would Disapprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of This Group:
Atheist	39.6%	47.6%
Muslim	26.3%	33.5%
Homosexual	22.6%	Not asked
Conservative Christian	13.5%	6.9%
Recent Immigrant	12.5%	Not Asked
Hispanic	7.6%	18.5%
Jew	7.4%	11.8%
Asian American	7.0%	18.5%
African American	4.6%	27.2%
White American	2.2%	2.3%

From the report's conclusions

“ To be an atheist in such an environment is not to be one more religious minority among many in a strongly pluralist society. Rather, Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether. ”

Why even argue with theists?

[edit]

The question remains, why should an atheist be held to a theist's definitions, their rules of argumentation, and their playing field? Ultimately, atheists don't need to make a case for atheism, because the assertive (or positive) claim is being made by those who say "God exists." By the rules of logic, science, and even law, the ones making the assertion must be the ones who prove their claim, and not the other way around. Otherwise atheists would also be held accountable to make a case for being an [athorist](#), etc., and almost everyone would be held accountable for being an "adragonist" or an "aunicomist" and an "adinosaurlivingwithpeopleist."

One reason that a person might argue with a theist is the same reason one might argue with a friend who is convinced she was abducted by aliens, or who thinks children are better off without vaccinations: because we care about them, and the choices they make can be harmful for themselves and their children; because living a life of fear out of an illusion seems an amazingly bad way to live. However, the people who have this motivation are generally known as "do-gooders" or "busybodies" and such arguments can be counter-productive in that they cement the delusions further.

Another common motivation for arguing with theists is political. Theists make up a majority of the world's population, and in many countries, a majority of the governing elite; they have often appealed to religion as a means to stay in power, often to draw a distinction between their subjects and foreigners (as in the Nazis' pandering to [Christianity](#), or, more recently, most European [Islamophobia](#)).

Hence, a strategy for subverting such elites is to dispute the religious beliefs to which they appeal. In the modern era, this started with the Enlightenment, as royal absolutism, based upon the role of God as King of Heaven, was challenged by questioning the existence of God. There was a significant atheist contingent within the [French Revolution](#).

Later, [communists](#) took up this kind of challenge to theism, with [Karl Marx](#) arguing that religion was the "opiate of the masses," used to hold workers in the trammels of the bourgeoisie. This sentiment was expressed in this excerpt from the famous communist anthem, *L'Internationale*:

“ There are no supreme saviours
Neither God, nor Caesar, nor tribune.
Producers, let us save ourselves
Decree the common salvation. ”

In the present day, theist politicians use religion as a rhetorical tool to push a variety of agendas that might otherwise come under closer scrutiny. For example, as the American evangelical-left figure [Jim Wallis](#) noted in his book *God's Politics*, the [Republican Party](#) has made a very successful use of religion, specifically concerning the [abortion](#) issue, to attract voters who would otherwise vote for the [Democratic Party](#).

A consequence of the prevalence of such rhetorical devices is that a broad range of [crank](#) religious ideas, specifically [creationism](#), gain credence when politicians use them to ensure the voting public of their religious *bona fides*. This in turn causes legitimate science to fall into some disrepute among the people, making it much easier for *other* kinds of [pseudoscience](#), such as [global warming denialism](#) and [scientific racism](#), to get a foot in the door.

In short, the presence of religion in politics can lead to a whole maelstrom of craziness, and some people might feel motivated to nip this in the bud by discrediting religion in general.

Demographics

[edit]

Specific research on atheists conducted in 2006 suggests^[33] that the true proportion of atheists is 2%^{[34][35]} to 4% in the United States, 17% in [Great Britain](#) and 32% in [France](#). A 2004 *Telegraph* poll found that 44% of Britons believed in a god, 35% did not, and 21% did not know.^[36]

Many studies put atheists in the higher intelligence group of the population.^[37] A recent meta-analysis of 39 eligible studies from 1927 to 2002 was published in *Mensa Magazine*, and concluded that atheists are more likely to be of higher intelligence than

their religious counterparts.^[38] According to an article in the prestigious *science journal Nature* in 1998 the belief in a personal god or *afterlife* was very low among the members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. Only 7.0% believed in a personal god as compared to more than 85% of the general U.S. population.^[39] This also suggests that the more intelligent subjects are more unlikely to believe in god or *supernatural* powers.

A recent study published in the *Annals of Family Medicine* suggests that, despite what some may think, religiousness does not appear to have a significant effect on how much physicians care for the underserved.^[40]

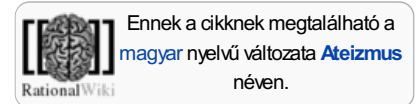


"Atheist Station" at Gallitzin, Pennsylvania.

See also

[[edit](#)]

- [Agnosticism](#)
- [Antitheism](#)
- [Apatheism](#)
- [Atheist bus campaign](#)
- [Atheophobia](#)
- [Brights Movement](#)
- [Deism](#)
- [Methodological naturalism](#)
- [RationalWiki Atheism FAQ for the Newly Deconverted](#)
- [Theism](#)
- [Jean Meslier](#), a priest who wrote about being/becoming an atheist



Ennek a cikknek megtalálható a magyar nyelvű változata **Ateizmus** néven.

Some Essays by Rationalwikians

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- [Category:Atheism essays](#)

External links

[[edit](#)]

- [American Atheists and The American Humanist Society debate the existence of God](#)
- [Some things about some other things - ScienceBlogs](#)
- [Pharyngula blogger, PZ Myers writes a gorgeous argument for the humanity of atheism](#)
- [Description of Atheism](#)
- [Investigating Atheism Project at University of Cambridge](#)
- [Atheist Scholar](#)
- [Center for Atheist Research](#)
- [Atheist Frontier - includes a wide range of useful resources](#)
- [The alt.atheism usenet \(newsgroups\) FAQ](#)
- [Atheism community \(very large\) on Google+](#)

Footnotes

[[edit](#)]

- ↑ [Richard Dawkins on militant atheism](#), February 2002
- ↑ [God Checker for a humorous list of many of these gods](#)
- ↑ This quotation serves as the dedication in Dawkins' *The God Delusion*
- ↑ It's actually the symbol used by *American Atheists*. The symbol was allegedly created at the founding of American Atheists in 1963... Looks more like the logo for the "Annapolis Nukes" triple-A baseball team.
- ↑ [Wikipedia diff, 31st August 2009](#)
- ↑ <http://www.humanistictexts.org/carvaka.htm>
- ↑ [Atheists As "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society](#)
- ↑ *The God Delusion*. Dawkins, Richard.
- ↑ a) [Public Religion Research Institute - American Values Survey](#) b) [Friendlya atheist - Would You Be Comfortable with an Atheist President? 2011 Survey Says...](#)
- ↑ [Richard Dawkins](#), an early chapter in *The Blind Watchmaker*.
- ↑ [What happens at an atheist church? ;'Not believing in God makes life more precious': meet the atheist 'churchgoers'](#)
- ↑ <http://www.skepticblog.org/2012/07/17/leaving-las-vegas-rich/>
- ↑ [Major Threat to Religion? Clergy People Coming Out as Atheists](#)
- ↑ [Major Threat to Religion? Clergy People Coming Out as Atheists](#)
- ↑ [Dutch rethink Christianity for a doubtful world](#)
- ↑ ["Groups support pastors, priests leaving the pulpit"](#), Freedom from Religion Foundation, October 14, 2011.
- ↑ [Teresa MacBain - Public Relations Director, American Atheists](#)
- ↑ [The Clergy Project: Do Atheist Clergy Change The Religion Game?](#)
- ↑ [strongatheism.net](#)
- ↑ Although some noncognitivists would claim the argument disproves atheism as well because it also makes a truth-claim about nonsensical statements, *which cannot be true or false by definition*.
- ↑ [Logical Arguments for Atheism](#) - The Secular Web
- ↑ [Evidential Arguments for Atheism](#) - The Secular Web
- ↑ With thanks to the [Fantasy Name Generator](#)
- ↑ <http://outcampaign.org/>
- ↑ Harris, Sam (2006). *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Knopf.
- ↑ [Paulkovich, Michael, No Meek Messiah. Annapolis: Spillix, 2012, p. 9. \[1\]](#)
- ↑ [Investigating Atheism - Current Controversies](#)
- ↑ [Doug Giles - How to Shut Up an Atheist if You Must](#)
- ↑ [Greta Christina's Blog - Atheism and the "shut up, that's why" argument.](#)

30. ↑ [It's Dangerous for Children To Know Atheism Exists, Says Illinois State Legislator](#) ↗
31. ↑ [George Bush states that atheists are not citizens or patriots](#) ↗
32. ↑ [Atheists As "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society](#) ↗
33. ↑ [Religious Views and Beliefs Vary Greatly by Country, According to the Latest Financial Times/Harris Poll](#) ↗
34. ↑ [Gilgoff, Dan, "Few 'No Religion' Americans Are Atheists", US News, Sep. 28, 2009, US News](#) ↗
35. ↑ [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey--Report 1: Religious Affiliation, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "1.6% are atheists" Pew study](#) ↗
36. ↑ [You'll have to take our word for it - the YouGov poll is no longer available](#)
37. ↑ [Landau, Elizabeth, "Liberalism, atheism, male sexual exclusivity linked to IQ", CNN Health, Feb. 26, 2010, "...people who identified as liberal and atheist had higher IQs..." CNN](#) ↗
38. ↑ [Bell, Paul. "Would you believe it?" *Mensa Magazine*, UK Edition, Feb. 2002, pp. 12–13.](#)
39. ↑ [Larson, Edward J.; Larry Witham \(1998\). "Correspondence: Leading scientists still reject god." *Nature* 394 \(6691\): 313.](#)
40. ↑ [Do Religious Physicians Disproportionately Care for the Underserved?](#) ↗

Categories: [Cover story articles](#) | [Atheism](#) | [Key concepts in atheism](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Religious terms](#)

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