

Atheism

By Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

Organizations: American Atheists; American Humanist Association; Atheists United; Council for Secular Humanism; Freedom from Religion Foundation

Books: Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*; George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*; Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*; Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*; Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*

Periodicals: *Free Inquiry*; *The Humanist*; *Reason*; *Skeptical Inquirer*

Definition and Related Views: **Atheism** is the belief that rejects belief in the existence of God, however conceived. **Agnosticism** is the belief that God's existence is unknown or unknowable. (An agnostic can be an atheist.) **Skepticism** is the belief that only what one can irrefutably prove is knowable; modern skepticism questions the validity of supernatural and paranormal experiences and events. **Naturalism** is the belief that only nature exists. **Nihilism** is the belief that human life has no meaning or purpose (since there is no God who created us). **Humanism** is the belief that human life does have meaning and purpose, but that human beings themselves are the source and standard of positive human values. (This definition does not apply to the movement called Renaissance humanism.) **Secularism** is the belief that public, social, and governmental values should be devoid of religious influence. **Religious humanism** affirms that humanism is compatible with religious or spiritual beliefs (though not with belief in the supernatural); **secular humanism** denies such compatibility.

HISTORY

Atheism has existed in various forms for well over two thousand years, but became a culturally powerful movement only in the past two centuries. Several ancient philosophers, such as Democritus and Epicurus, disputed the existence of the popular Greek and Roman gods or at least questioned their involvement in human affairs. Sextus Empiricus advocated an extreme form of skepticism that was also atheistic.

The Enlightenment, an intellectual and cultural movement emerging toward the end of the eighteenth century, rejected the Bible and any other revelation and insisted on unguided human reason as the sole authority in all matters of knowledge. Enlightenment thinkers tended at first to hold to Deism, the belief that a Creator God made the universe but has no further involvement in it, but its method led quickly to atheism. The philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant criticized the standard arguments for God's existence. If we cannot know God's existence through either revelation or reason, the only basis left is religious or spiritual feeling or blind faith. Western thought since the Enlightenment has therefore tended in three directions. Some accept the Enlightenment critiques and reject belief in God (atheism). Some accept those critiques and base belief in God on feeling (*pietism*) or faith (*fideism*). Some reject those critiques and base belief in God on revelation or reason or both.

Atheism flowered in nineteenth-century German philosophy through such thinkers as Ludwig Feuerbach, who introduced the notion that God was an imagined father figure, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who declared famously that God was dead—meaning that humanity had supposedly understood that God did not exist after all. A key to the development of a thoroughly atheistic worldview, however, was the scientific theory of biological evolution by natural selection in the British scientist Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* (1859). Although not all evolutionists are atheists, atheism is intellectually untenable without some version of evolutionism. Since Darwin, theorists in the behavioral and social sciences have sought to apply the naturalistic assumptions of evolutionism to humanity. A notable example is the work of Sigmund Freud, who developed a theory of human psychology that was overtly atheistic. According to Freud, belief in God is a projection of

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the ideal father figure and thus a form of wish-fulfillment (compare Feuerbach). Most recently, some scientists have attempted to explain the mind, moral values, and even religious belief in purely biological terms.

Atheism became the worldview basis for powerful totalitarian ideologies in the twentieth century through the philosophy of the nineteenth-century atheist Karl Marx, whose *Communist Manifesto* (1848) inspired both the Bolshevik (Leninist) Revolution in Russia, leading to the formation of the Soviet Union, and the Communist (Maoist) Revolution in China.

The major philosophical tradition of the twentieth century compatible with atheism in the English-speaking world was analytic philosophy. The leading figure of this movement was Bertrand Russell, whose book *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1927) continues to influence atheist thought today. What is distinctive about atheistic analytic philosophy is its claim that the very concept of God is meaningless. Kai Nielsen and Michael Martin are two contemporary atheist philosophers working from within the analytic tradition. Toward the end of the twentieth century, a group of Christian philosophers—most notably Alvin Plantinga—using the tools and methods of analytic philosophy led a kind of revival of *theism* (belief in God) as a serious philosophical option.

Contemporary atheism, if anything, tends to be even more aggressive in its denunciation of all religion. The rise of extremist and militant forms of Islam around the world worries atheists, as does the conservative Christian resurgence in politics and culture in the United States. Antagonism toward religion in the West reached a sort of critical mass in September 2006, when two bestselling books attacking belief in God and all religion were published in a two-day period—Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.

Quantifying the number of atheists is notoriously difficult, since many people are reluctant to label themselves as atheists and definitions of atheism vary. According to a 2002 Pew Research study, 1% of Americans professed to be atheists and 2% professed to be agnostics.¹ Yet according to a 2006 Harris poll, 4% of Americans professed to be atheists and 14% professed to be agnostics.² Since it is doubtful that so many people changed views in four years, we should be cautious about viewing either of these statistics as definitive. One thing is clear from every study done: atheism is much more prevalent in most of the rest of the industrialized world. The same Harris poll found that 17% of Great Britain, 20% of Germany, and 30% or more of both France and Spain professed to be atheists, while roughly a third of the people in those nations identified themselves as agnostics. Since some forms of Buddhism and Confucianism are atheistic, millions of people associated with these religions in Southeast Asia and China are actually atheists. Worldwide, younger people are more likely to be atheists, suggesting that atheism is likely to be on the rise during the coming years.

WHAT ATHEISTS DO AND DON'T BELIEVE

What atheists don't believe: Some atheists insist on defining *atheism* as simply the lack or absence of theism (*a-theism*) rather than as disbelief or rejection of belief in God (*athe-ism*). Such a definition allows them to claim that atheism is simply the default view of children, people who have never heard of God, and anyone else who simply lacks religious belief—thus putting the burden of proof entirely on the theist and leaving the atheist with nothing in need of defense. However, common usage and even the titles of some atheist books (e.g., Smith's *Atheism: The Case Against God*) demonstrate that atheism really means the belief that rejects belief in God.³

We may distinguish two types of atheism. *Agnostic atheism* asserts that we do not have enough information to determine if God exists or not, but in the absence of evidence in favor of theism we should proceed as if he does not. *Explicit atheism* asserts that we have enough information to conclude at the very least that God probably does not exist. The claim of some explicit atheists that God simply cannot possibly exist is often called *dogmatic atheism*. George Smith, for example, claims, "It is logically impossible for god—a concept replete with absurdities and contradictions—to have a referent in reality, just as it is logically impossible for a square circle to exist. Given the attempts to define god, we may now state—with certainty—that *god does not exist*."⁴

Atheists have given several reasons for rejecting belief in God. First, atheists claim that the traditional arguments for God's existence are invalid. For example, one version of the cosmological argument reasons from the fact that the universe had a beginning to the conclusion that someone or something transcending the universe gave the universe its start, or caused it to exist (i.e., God). Atheists typically criticize this argument on the grounds that if the universe requires a beginning, then so does God. This criticism misses the point, which is that *something* must exist that did not

have a beginning and that is uncaused. The design arguments reason from the evidence for design of and within the universe to the conclusion that it has a designer (i.e., God). Atheists commonly reply that if the universe implies a designer, at most it implies an extremely intelligent but not omniscient or all-wise designer. This claim is disputable, but even if it is valid, the argument still proves something that the atheist must deny and that the theist gladly affirms—namely, that the universe has a designer. These are just two examples of the many controversies today over the validity of various arguments for God’s existence.

A second reason that atheists give for rejecting belief in God is the great amount of evil and suffering in the world, both for human beings and for other living things on the earth. Atheists argue that an all-powerful God would be able to eliminate all such evil and suffering, and an all-good God would want to do so—yet he has not eliminated evil, from which they conclude that God, at least as traditionally understood in Christianity, does not exist. This is the classic formulation of the so-called “problem of evil.” Christians have offered a variety of responses to this objection to belief in God, of which we may mention three. (1) Human evil is the result of human beings abusing their capacity for making choices (their “free will”), a capacity that is so vital to God’s purpose in creating the world that it is worth allowing us to abuse that capacity in order for us to have it. One may put it this way: Would atheists like to have their own choice-making capacity removed from them? (2) Although God could have created a world in which there were no creatures with the capacity to rebel against him and do one another harm, God chose to make this world because the eventual outcome will be a world far greater than any he might otherwise have made. That outcome will be a world populated by beings who have the capacity to make free choices and who use them only to do good. (3) God does not normally prevent “physical evils” such as hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, and the like, from doing harm to people. These types of events harm and kill believers as well as unbelievers, so that it really is wrong to speculate that such natural disasters are divine punishments. Because the human race is fallen in sin, we all live in this world as mortal creatures and are therefore subject to death at any time and from any number of causes. God does not *owe* any of his creatures anything: “The LORD gives and the LORD takes away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

A third reason that atheists give for rejecting belief in God is the enormity of evil that has been done in God’s name in Christianity and in other religions. The usual litany of the evils of religion includes the following: wars of religion (e.g., the Crusades); the persecution of heretics (e.g., the Inquisitions), witches, people of other religions, and atheists; other forms of religious intolerance; the history of racism and sexism associated with various religions; slavery; and obscurantism, anti-intellectualism, and superstition associated with religion. The problem with this argument is that virtually all cultures throughout history have been very religious, so that virtually all evils committed in history are going to have some religious association. People who wish to get away with evil will almost always try to cloak their deeds in sacred garb. In some instances the evils may be endemic or essential to the religion; in other instances they may be abuses or distortions of the religion in question.

What atheists do believe: Atheism by definition is the rejection of belief in God. It is not, then, a positive belief system, although it generally requires the acceptance of specific beliefs in order to be intellectually coherent (most notably naturalism and evolutionism). We must, then, distinguish between what is essential to atheist belief and what many but not all atheists believe.

All atheists adhere to some form of *naturalism*, and most, if not all, would also accept some version of *physicalism*, according to which only physical things exist (also called *materialism*). It would not be technically correct to say that atheists believe that only the universe exists, since some atheists hold to some version of the many-worlds hypothesis (according to which there have been, or are, many universes).

Theists commonly argue that atheism logically entails *nihilism*. While some atheists do embrace the life style of nihilism (simply living for the moment, or for their own pleasures or ambitions), few if any philosophers or serious thinkers are thoroughgoing nihilists. Typically, atheist thinkers embrace some form of *secular humanism*, according to which human life has no *inherent, absolute, or transcendent* meaning or purpose, but can and should have meaning because of our capacity for reflection and decision. In this view, human beings individually and collectively can (and should) create their own purpose and meaning. Even Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the philosopher most often described as a nihilist, argued that human beings should strive to overcome the apparent meaninglessness of life.

ATHEISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Since atheists deny the existence of God, they quite naturally reject the Bible, not only as divinely inspired, but as at all reliable historically. Atheists not only deny the miraculous events reported in the Bible but typically deny any historical roots of the biblical accounts. Hence atheists typically doubt the existence of Moses or Jesus as historical figures.

Atheists almost universally have little but scorn for biblical values. The Old Testament Law comes under especially strenuous—and usually shrill—attack. Atheists fault the Law for stipulating the death penalty for idolatry, adultery, homosexual acts, and other offenses. They also harshly criticize the New Testament, complaining about Jesus' frequent references to Hell and about Paul's supposed hatred or oppression of women. The latter complaint is as groundless as it is common, since Paul worked with women in ministry and treated them with great respect. It was Paul who said that in Christ "there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28).

These criticisms of the Bible and of the Christian faith enjoy wide currency in our culture, even beyond the ranks of avowed atheists. They demonstrate the continued and even increased need for Christians to study basic apologetics in order to be prepared to give an answer for their hope in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15).

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Boa, Kenneth D., and Robert M. Bowman, Jr. *20 Compelling Evidences that God Exists*. Colorado Springs: Cook—RiverOak, 2002.

Collins, C. John. *Science & Faith: Friends or Foes?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2003.

Craig, William Lane, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*. Point/Counterpoint Series. James P. Sterba, series ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Geisler, Norman L., and Winfried Corduan. *Philosophy of Religion*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.

McGrath, Alister E. *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. New York and London: Blackwell, 2004. See also his recent book *The Dawkins Delusion* (InterVarsity, 2007).

Samples, Kenneth Richard. *Without a Doubt: Answering the 20 Toughest Faith Questions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.

Schmidt, Alvin J. *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

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Notes

¹ "Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad" (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, March 20, 2002), Q. 18; <http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/poll2002.pdf>.

² "Religious Views and Beliefs Vary Greatly by Country, According to the Latest Financial Times/Harris Poll" (Rochester, NY: Harris Interactive, Dec. 20, 2006); <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1131>.

³ See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 67-69.

⁴ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1979), 88, emphasis in original.



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