

## 1. THE MEANING OF ATHEISM

### i. Definition of Atheism

The word 'atheism' is derived from the Greek: *a* meaning 'not' is conjoined with *theos* meaning 'god'. So we may define atheism as follows: it is the belief *that there is no God*. Unfortunately definition of terms is rarely this straightforward and here too we find different shades of meaning. For example, there is:

- Constructive atheism
- Epistemological atheism
- Practical atheism
- Nihilistic atheism
- Axiological Atheism
- Reductionary Atheism

and many others besides. . . .

We shall encounter some of these forms of atheism as we proceed through this book. I wish, however, to keep matters simple. So let us divide atheism into two types: there is *negative atheism* and there is *positive atheism*. A negative atheist (sometimes also called a weak or implicit atheist) is somebody who is simply devoid of any religious belief. When speaking of God to such a person, he or she has no idea what you are talking about, nothing comes to mind, and one is greeted with a blank stare. On these grounds, the writer George H. Smith, in his book *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1979), argues that young children, because they are ignorant of religion, must be classified as atheists.<sup>1</sup> More usually, however, the term 'atheist' is applied to adults, to those who have never shown the slightest interest in the question of whether or not God exists, either through lack of education or more often through total indifference.

Positive atheists, on the other hand, are not like this. These are people (sometimes also called strong or explicit atheists) who know something of religion and who for a variety of reasons reject its central claim that a god exists. Positive atheists therefore *present arguments* for the rejection of

**Negative and  
positive atheism**

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<sup>1</sup> Buffalo, New York, Prometheus Books, 1989, pp.13-14.

## Agnosticism and Secularism

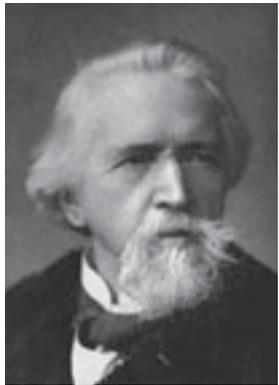


Thomas Huxley

religious beliefs: they attempt to show either that theistic arguments are invalid in themselves or that they are incompatible with other arguments that have been shown to be valid. *Atheism for Beginners*, because it provides arguments against the existence of God, is accordingly an exercise in positive atheism. So from now on when I speak of ‘atheism’ I mean ‘positive atheism.’

Before we continue it is worth making two further distinctions. The first is between atheism and *agnosticism*. This term, originally coined by the Victorian intellectual and man of science, Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), combines the Greek *a* (‘not’) with *gnosis*, meaning ‘knowledge’. So an agnostic is literally someone without knowledge. This distances agnostics from both theists and atheists. Strictly speaking, agnostics suspend judgment about whether there is a god or not; and they do this because they have imposed a limitation on what knowledge is possible, claiming that all we can ever know is limited to the real world, the world of sense and experience. Accordingly agnostics make clear that they do not know whether God exists or not. This is not the same thing as saying, then, that there is no God: it is more a case of saying that nothing can be said one way or the other, so making theism and atheism equally speculative.<sup>1</sup>

The second distinction I wish to make is between atheism and *secularism*, two terms that are sometimes taken as interchangeable. But this is incorrect. The word ‘secularism’ was first coined by the editor and lecturer, George Holyoake (1817-1906) – incidentally, the last person in England to be convicted and imprisoned on a charge of blasphemy (1842) – and defines a principle of separation for the ordering of society, a principle that is neither religious nor sectarian. So an attitude of reciprocity should apply: the State may not govern religion and religion may not govern the State. Holyoake later described himself as an agnostic and so, strictly speaking, his secularism is neutral in regard to religious belief and is without any specific atheistic attack upon religion. Social, moral and political progress, he believed, could be achieved without religion. All that was required was to employ human reason and the achievements of science, and, importantly, to adopt an absolute distinction between church and state. But many of his contemporaries thought this indifference to religious belief could not be sustained and that atheism should be taken as a necessary presupposition of secularism. This prompted a fierce public debate between Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891, **Biography: pp. 202-204**), the most prominent of 19<sup>th</sup> century English atheists and the first atheist to become a Member of Parliament.<sup>2</sup> But Bradlaugh’s position is also incorrect. For while it is



George Holyoake



Charles Bradlaugh

1 *The Atheist’s Creed*, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2010, pp.33-38. Hereafter cited as *TAC*.

2 Bradlaugh won his Northamptonshire seat in 1880 but was not sworn in as a Member until 1886 because he refused to take the religious Oath of Allegiance. Among his many supporters were William Gladstone and George Bernard Shaw. Mohandas Gandhi attended his funeral.

certainly true that all atheists are, by and large, secularists, and while it is also true that the anti-religious bias in secularism has become more aggressive in recent years – with some countries now banning religious clothing in schools – it is not the case that all secularists are atheists. For one may be a believer and a secularist, accepting that a multi-cultural society will contain many religious identities, that all of these should be equally protected, and that none should obtain special privileges or a legal dominance within the institutions of state.

**Classify the following as negative atheistic or positive atheistic or agnostic. Do you detect any differences in the atheistic positions?**

I haven't a clue what you are talking about!

I know that there are no gods.

I don't know whether there are gods or not.

I don't believe in the gods or any religion except mine.

Any belief in God is impossible.

For all I know, there may or may not be a god.

I can't believe in a god whose followers are terrorists.

There is no reason to believe that God exists.

All new born babies are atheists.

I don't believe in God but I do believe there is a life after death.

I don't care whether God exists or not.

I believe in scientific explanations, not in God-talk.

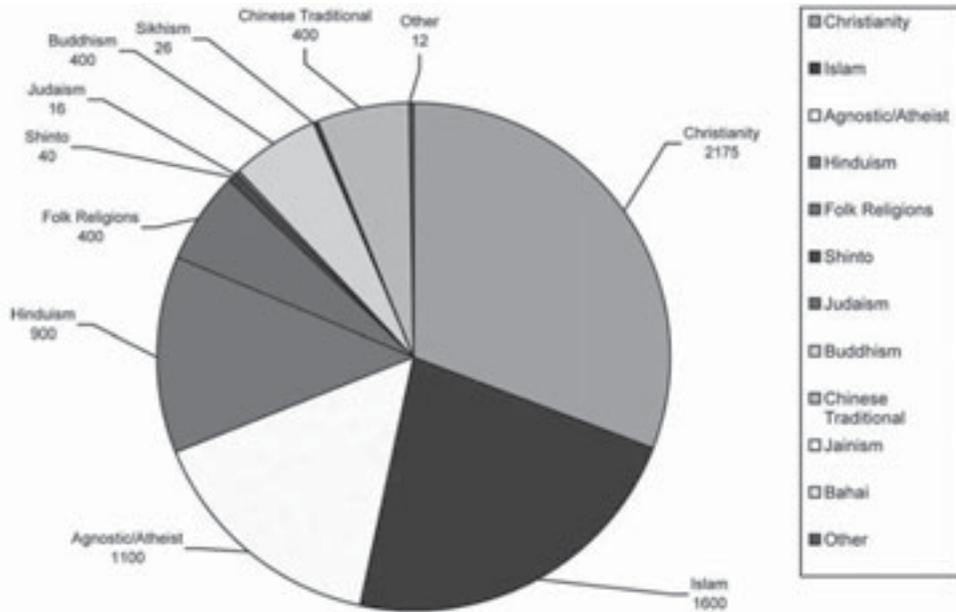
In the absence of evidence, all talk about God is pointless.

## EXERCISE 1

### ii. The Variety of Religions and 'The Many-Gods Objection'

It must appear to any neutral observer that atheism is going to have a hard time of it against the forces of religion. After all, there are many religions and many gods. It is notoriously difficult to give precise figures about membership, but it is generally agreed that the 'Abrahamic' religions – those beliefs which have the patriarch Abraham as a common ancestor, i.e., Christianity, Islam and Judaism – are the biggest group, with an estimated 3.7 billion adherents; and that of these three Christianity is the largest, with over 2 billion followers. And with these religions come their gods. Islam (1.6 billion) has Allah, Judaism (16 million) has Yahweh (or Jehovah), and Christianity has a triune God – three persons in one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hinduism (900 million) is even more complicated: it has a multitude of gods symbolizing the one abstract

## World Religions



A pie chart representing adherents to world religions (units in millions)

Supreme Being or Brahman, of which the most important deities are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and the most popular Ganesha, generally recognized as an elephant riding a mouse. Buddhism (400 million), which is historically an offshoot of Hinduism, is a much more difficult religion to categorize: some would say that it is not a religion at all but a philosophy of life, providing a code of moral practice without a defined godhead. To these five major belief-systems may be added many others: Sikhism, the Bahá'í faith, Shinto, Jainism, Cheondoism, Tenrikyo, Cao Dai, Ahl-e Haqq, Seicho-no-Ie, Yazidism, Rastafarianism, to mention just a few, and all of these have differing concepts of the divine.

Another interesting statistic is worth giving. If we place the five world religions in descending order of size – so Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism – then Atheism, as a belief system, ranks third, with estimates putting the total number (very conservatively) at anything between 500-750 million. This means that there are twice as many atheists as there are Buddhists and over forty times more atheists than there are Jews.<sup>1</sup>

It might be tempting at this point to adopt a modern position, known as *religious pluralism*. This says that, despite their obvious historical and cultural differences, all these religions are in a sense the same with the same focus; that they are in reality simply different responses to one divine reality, albeit called by various names (God, Brahman, Allah, Krishna, Dhamma). But this is not a strong argument. This is because the various claims to truth made by these religions are not merely different but often

<sup>1</sup> The major sources consulted are *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, *The World Christian Encyclopedia* and *The Association of Religion Data Archives*.

### Criticism of Religious Pluralism

*contradictory*, i.e., one religion rejects the claims of another religion. We need only look again at the three Abrahamic religions to see this. It is true that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are *monotheistic* – they believe that there is only one God – and that each of them believes in an after-life (although less defined in Judaism) and an elaborate system of rewards and punishments; but Christianity, as we have just seen, worships a triune god, whereas Judaism and Islam do not. Islam maintains that Mohammad is the pre-eminent prophet of Allah, whereas Christianity and Judaism do not. Christianity claims that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, which Judaism denies – it is still waiting for its Messiah – while Islam gives Jesus only prophetic status. These, then, are not just differences of opinion to be grouped together in a kind of convenient smorgasbord of religions, but are *contrary claims*, which are *logically incompatible* and over which much blood has been spilt.

And these differences multiply the closer one looks. We find them not just *between* the religions, which one might perhaps expect, but also and more surprisingly *within* each religion. Let us take Christianity as an example. Its three major divisions – Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism – have been further classified into countless denominations and sects, all of them separated by doctrinal differences of a greater or lesser degree, one estimate quoting a staggering 33,820 in number.<sup>1</sup>

This extraordinary profusion of religious affiliation, far from providing believers with an initial support for their position – on the basis that something must be true if so many people believe it – can work in the opposite direction and raise an immediate doubt about the strength of their case. Let us call this ‘The Many-Gods Objection.’ When the question is asked, ‘Do you believe in God or not?’ the choice is now not so simple: it is no longer, to use a betting analogy, a two-horse race. For, as we have just seen, such is the range of possibilities both between religions and within each religion that the assumption that any one religion is the only true religion becomes tantamount to a statistical improbability. Consider also the following three points:

1) The assumption that Religion A is the only true religion should not be made solely within the finite range of possible beliefs, but within an *infinite* range of religious systems, any one of which is *logically possible*. For what Religion A commends is or may be contradicted and condemned by Religion B; and what Religion B commends is or may be contradicted and condemned by Religion C, and so on and so forth. Thus for every religion requiring one course of action, and promising in return a specific reward (e.g., eternal life), there may always be another actual or possible religion that requires a different course of action but that promises the same reward (e.g., eternal life). It is, of course, also logically possible that Religion A is indeed *the only true religion* – that it is this religion alone that will lead to the reward of everlasting life and happiness, and that accordingly all the other religions are false and rightly condemned. But the probability that

<sup>1</sup> A list compiled by David B. Barrett in his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

## The Many-Gods Objection

the believer has chosen the right religion in choosing Religion A becomes a practical impossibility when the options available are themselves infinite, i.e., when there is an infinite number of logically possible religions to choose from. With two horses running, the odds of winning are extremely high; but the odds lengthen with any increase in the number of runners. When the numbers become almost logically limitless, in the way I have described, it is only a fool who places a bet.

2) The evidence against any one religion being the true religion will always be greater than the evidence for it. This follows from the fact that every claim that Religion A is the only true religion – and that accordingly every claim to truth of every other religion is false – will be outweighed by all the other religions which are doing precisely the same thing, namely, claiming that their home-religion is true and that therefore Religion A (or any other religion) is false. We may conclude, in other words, that those who believe in Religion A will always be *collectively outnumbered* by the believers of all other religions. So the evidence against Religion A, from the standpoint of these other religions, will always be greater than the evidence that supports it – if this were not the case, it would be very short-sighted not to convert immediately to Religion A and so gain the rewards that it offers. But again, this is not to say that Religion A is *not* the only true religion. For in any set of contrary beliefs the logical possibility remains that one of them is true. However, if each of these different religions has its own guarantees – e.g., the miraculous birth of its founder, the miracles performed in its name, the divine origin of its scriptures which attest to its truth, and so on – then it is difficult to see how any one religion can set itself apart as the one true religion, reject all other claims as false, while offering much the same justifications (e.g., miracles, etc.).

3) To repeat, it is possible that one of these religions (perhaps Religion A, for all we know) is the only true religion: that it is the only horse that will win this particular race. It is equally possible, however, that *all of them are false*, and that therefore no horse will ever get past the finishing-line. Consider, for example, the following lists:

## EXERCISE 2

**In Column 1 are the names of gods. Attach them to the correct religion in Column 2**

### Column 1

Horus  
An-Anu  
Baal  
Dagda  
Dagon  
Hoori  
Huitzilopochtli  
JHWH

### Column 2

Egyptian  
Canaanite/Phoenician  
Celtic  
Persian  
Sumerian  
Japanese  
Roman  
Jewish

|          |              |
|----------|--------------|
| Jupiter  | Aztec        |
| Kukulcan | Greek        |
| Marduk   | Babylonian   |
| Mithra   | Indian/Hindu |
| Odin     | Philistine   |
| Shiva    | Mayan        |
| Zeus     | Norse        |



Aztec sacrifice to  
Huitzilopochtli

The list of divine names given in Column 1 – some familiar, some not – could be extended quite easily by many hundreds of additions. There is one feature of it, however, that stands out. For the most part – there are admittedly one or two exceptions – these are all the names of gods who are dead, by which I mean that no one believes in them anymore. Yet once upon a time these immortal beings were worshipped by thousands, if not millions of believers: sacrifices were made to them, prayers were offered up to them, songs sung in praise of them, priests ministered to them in elaborate rituals, wars were fought in their name; and not to believe in them, or even merely to doubt their existence, was an offence invariably punished

by an unpleasant death. But these deities, once so popular and revered, are all gone now, consigned to the dustbin of gods. So we must ask ourselves: What makes our gods so special? Why do we assume that our gods will survive, while so many others have not? Or will it be the case that the gods worshipped today will also slowly fade away like all the others before them, finally leaving us to live quite alone in a godless world?

It is this possibility that believers reject. It is not difficult to see why. Religious people, after all, derive enormous satisfactions from their faith. The world need not be regarded as the haphazard product of the chance collision of atomic particles, as a miniscule dot turning within the empty vastness of space, but as the specific design of a personal deity, who thereby endows the universe with meaning and purpose. Within this divine scheme of things, human beings hold a unique status as the supreme achievement of divine creation, with God as both their comforter and judge, the all-seeing, omnipotent and omni-benevolent Father, to whom each of us may turn in worship, prayer, and thanksgiving. Human beings are also reassured that their natural and wholly understandable terror of death is misplaced. For death is not an end to life but merely a transition to another realm of eternal bliss, where loved ones will be seen again and the faithful rewarded. All these beliefs are rendered certainties by the miraculous interventions of

Answers: Horus = Egyptian, An-Anu = Sumerian, Baal = Canaanite/Rhoenician, Dagon = Philistine, Hoori = Japanese, Huitzilopochtli = Aztec, JHWH = Jewish, Jupiter = Roman, Kukulcan = Mayan, Marduk = Babylonian, Mithra = Persian, Odin = Norse, Shiva = Indian/Hindu, Zeus = Greek.

God in the lives of the great wonder-workers of the past, in the teachings of holy texts, and in the day-to-day experiences of believers, in which God's presence is immediately and undeniably felt. An otherwise meaningless world is thus rendered meaningful by the divine presence.

It is this position that atheism rejects. The seductive blandishments of religion are to be resisted as perversions of rationality and products of a closed mind, in which comfort and security are preferred to evidence and the tests of probability. Atheists argue that not one religious claim in any belief-system you care to name has actually been *verified*; and if the demand for some kind of evidential certainty obtrudes too far, a further defence is immediately called up, namely, that 'the ways of God are inscrutable', or that God himself is a 'mystery' and 'unknowable' but one that nevertheless provides the only satisfactory 'explanation' for all that is. This kind of double-think – where the omission of an explanation becomes the explanation – pervades religious thinking like a virus, and is famously exhibited by Augustine of Hippo (354-396): 'What is faith but believing what you do not see'. This is an attitude of mind that would be deplored in almost all other walks of life. It is not surprising that this reliance on 'evidence of things unseen' should produce such a flurry of activity, a positive industry in fact: of occult manifestations, visions, miraculous healings, charismatic trances, speaking with tongues, and those spiritualist communications from the 'other side', which provide indubitable evidence, if somewhat unspecific in detail, of an after-life. Nor is it helpful to the believer's argument, when looking back through the history books, to see how often religious authorities of the past, when pressed on these matters, have threatened disbelief with punishment, often resorting to methods of coercion and oppression almost unparalleled in barbarity, criminalising doubt itself.<sup>1</sup> It is not, then, that the world is meaningless without God but rather that the concept of God, which is supposed to render things meaningful, is itself so intellectually dubious. It is not, admittedly, meaningless in itself – it is not in the same category of contradiction as 'married bachelor' or 'round square' – but it seems to defy nevertheless all the normal rules of rationality, all the known tests of judgment by which we decide that things are true or false, to the point indeed that the term 'God', as an explanatory device, becomes entirely vacuous. In his famous 'Parable of the Gardener', Antony Flew, makes the same point.

**Flew:  
The Invisible  
Gardener**

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot'. The other disagrees, 'There is no gardener'. So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds

<sup>1</sup> One should add: 'and not only in the past.' For an example of present-day Islamic repression, see Ayaan Hirsi Ali, 'How (and Why) I became an Infidel', in Christopher Hitchens' *The Portable Atheist*, London, Da Capo Press, 2007, pp.477-480.

never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. ‘But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.’ At last the Sceptic despairs, ‘But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?’<sup>1</sup>

It doesn’t take much to see what Flew is driving at. Later on in the same article he speaks of an hypothesis being ‘killed by inches’, dying the ‘death by a thousand qualifications’. It is not that there is no evidence for God – believers obviously maintain that there is evidence sufficient for their faith and that this supports their belief in the ‘Invisible Gardener’– but that on inspection the evidence proves so friable, so little able to withstand close analysis. Does God, then, serve any useful function as an explanation? Flew takes the proposition that ‘God loves us like a Father’ as an example. A real earthly Father is driven frantic by seeing his son dying of cancer; but no Heavenly Father intervenes and so appears for all practical purposes unconcerned about the situation. So what kind of ‘fatherly love’ is this? Accordingly we adjust the original proposition: ‘Of course God loves us like a Father . . . but his love is different from human love and is inscrutable.’ And so the qualifications mount and the original proposition is exposed as empty rhetoric and dies the death. For it can now accommodate any amount of suffering and any amount of inactivity, neither of which any human father would tolerate, while still retaining the proposition that God, despite all these evidences to the contrary, remains our Father and still loves us. At what point, then, are we justified in saying that God behaves like no father we know, never intervenes like any normal father would to alleviate the suffering of his children, and so does not love us? From there it is a short step to the conclusion that there is no substantive difference between saying ‘God is a Father’ and ‘No such Father exists.’

The specific problem that Flew is referring to here goes by the general title of *the problem of evil*, and we shall be looking at it in much more detail in Chapter Three. The argument maintains that the sheer volume of suffering in the world – of which a child’s death by inoperable brain cancer is just one example – is incompatible with the notion of an omnipotent and benevolent deity; of a divine Father, in other words, who could have done something about this innocent child but didn’t. So:

1. If God, who is a benevolent and omnipotent being, exists, there would be no evil.
2. Evil exists.
3. Therefore God does not exist.

The problem of evil is the most philosophically intractable of all the dilemmas facing the believer: one famous Roman Catholic theologian, Hans

<sup>1</sup> ‘Theology and Falsification’, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London, SCM Press, 1955, pp.96. This well-known article is given in its entirety in my *The Philosophy of Religion*, Volume 2, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2008, pp.146-152. Hereafter cited as *PR*.

Küng, has called it the ‘rock of atheism’;<sup>1</sup> and, as we shall later discover, there have been various attempts to resolve it. For the moment, however, I should like to make one final point before proceeding to the first of our atheistic arguments. The aim of the atheist is, by and large, not to demonstrate that God is logically impossible – arguments that do seek either to prove or to disprove the existence of God are comparatively few and far between – but to show where the balance of probability lies between the two claims, ‘God exists’ and ‘God does not exist’.<sup>2</sup> This estimate of probability is achieved by viewing each of these claims as shorthand explanations of our universe and individual experiences, and by seeking to discover a link between the explanations being presented here and what is *already understood to be the case*. So we have to decide, in other words, which of the two hypotheses on offer makes what we already know either more or less *intelligible*. Is our world and our presence in it better explained in terms of the natural order – by an explanation of the universe restricted to the universe itself – or does the preferred choice lie in an altogether different dimension of reality, beyond the limits of the sensible world? To use the language of the courtroom: we must now decide, as good jury-members, which of these two is the more likely candidate as an explanation, which one better satisfies the requirements of evidence, and which one can therefore be accepted as being true beyond reasonable doubt.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with George Smith that all children are atheists?
2. Does the fact that so many people believe there is a God support the claim that a God exists?
3. Analyse and discuss the concept of religious pluralism.
4. What is the ‘Many-Gods’ objection to religious belief?
5. Contrast the satisfactions to be derived from theism and atheism.

### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

- Beattie, Tina, *The New Atheists*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007.
- Berman, David, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell*, London & New York, Routledge 1988
- Buckley, Michael J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987.
- Flint, Robert, *Agnosticism*, Edinburgh, William Blackwood, 1903
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1 *On Being a Christian*, translated Edward Quinn, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1976, p.432.

2 A view, however, not shared by all. In Chapter Eight I list several arguments that have been taken as logical proofs against the existence of God.