

NO GODS, NO MASTERS



# No Gods, No Masters

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As an atheist, I knew that was it. I could take no comfort in belief in an afterlife, or the notion that life on earth is just a journey towards some spiritual payoff in another dimension. I'm convinced that what we do here and now is all that we get. Every second, minute, hour, and day is sacred.

From a young age, I knew I was an atheist. Having seen no scientific evidence of a higher celestial being to change my mind, I have remained an atheist to this day. Let's be honest: Being an atheist can sometimes be exhausting. It's not so much defending my stance against those who practice a faith. It's the pressure and exhaustion of trying to achieve everything you can before you shuffle off this mortal coil. But atheism has infused my life with the mantra that every moment counts, so don't waste it. That attitude has opened doors, and the happiest moments of my life would likely never have materialized if I didn't have such a *carpe diem* attitude. Life as an atheist is about the here and now. Instead of answering to a higher being, it's about how you choose to make an impact on those around you. I find sleeping a waste of time; fortunately, I inherited from my father the short sleep/early riser gene.

I am the physical manifestation of burning the candle at both ends, although I like to think that when the flames meet the middle and extinguish, I'll be so old that I am likely to die any moment anyway (I am reaching that point!).

Of course, "*live fast, die young*" is a common trap to fall into. If you're not careful, you can be too impulsive, too hedonistic, and be consumed by a "*grass is always greener on the other side*" mentality. You can be left dissatisfied with your life, and dreams that always seem out of reach. Without forging the long-term plans that are necessary for practical living—a home, savings—you can be left hanging. But channel your atheism in the right way and it can be incredibly productive and fulfilling.

Life is all about falling and getting back up and learning from where you went.

***"I'm still an Atheist. Thank God!" - Luis Buñuel***



## A Brief History of Atheism

Before humans created organized religions in a stable (mostly urban) environment, with hierarchies, rules, exclusions and more, they were facing every minute frightening, or elating experiences due to cosmos, weather, seasonal changes and catastrophes, hunger and thirst, and –above all, permanently looming- disease and death. They tried to soothe, please, ally ‘nature’ by worshiping and making offerings to specific rocks, trees, streams or volcanoes. And when fire was mastered, they worshiped the Lares or Zao Jun (the Kitchen God), for protection and a regular supply of food. In Japanese Shinto, the spirits are not separate from nature, they are in it. They are in the trees, in the rocks, in the breeze, the stream, the waterfall.

Without knowing it, just like Mr. Jourdain, in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, ignored that he was speaking in prose, these humans were *atheists*.

**Atheism** (derived from the Ancient Greek ἄθεος; *atheos* meaning "without gods; godless; secular; denying or disdaining the gods, especially officially sanctioned gods") is the absence or rejection of the belief that deities exist. The English term was used at least as early as the sixteenth century and atheistic ideas and their influence have a longer history. Over the centuries, atheists have supported their lack of belief in gods through a variety of avenues, including scientific, philosophical, and ideological notions.

**In the East**, a contemplative life not centered on the idea of deities began in the sixth century BCE with the rise of **Jainism**, **Buddhism**, and certain sects of **Hinduism** in India, and of **Daoism** in China. These religions claim to offer a philosophic and salvific path not involving deity worship. Deities are not seen as necessary to the salvific goal of the early Buddhist tradition; their reality is explicitly questioned and often rejected. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the notion of gods and basic Buddhist principles -at least in some interpretations.

Within the *astika* ("orthodox") schools of Hindu philosophy, the **Samkhya** and the early **Mimamsa** school did not accept a creator-deity in their respective systems. The principal text of the *Samkhya* school, the *Samkhya Karika*, was written by Ishvara Krishna in the fourth century CE, by which time it was already a dominant Hindu school; the origins of the school are much older and are lost in legend. The school

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was both dualistic and atheistic. They believed in a dual existence of *Prakriti* ("nature") and *Purusha* ("spirit") and had no place for an *Ishvara* ("God") in its system, arguing that the existence of *Ishvara* cannot be proved and hence cannot be admitted to exist. The school dominated Hindu philosophy in its day, but declined after the tenth century, although commentaries were still being written as late as the sixteenth century.

The foundational text for the *Mimamsa* school is the *Purva Mimamsa Sutrās* of Jaimini (c. third to first century BCE). The school reached its height c. 700 CE, and for some time exerted near-dominant influence on learned Hindu thought. The *Mimamsa* school saw that their primary enquiry was into the nature of *dharma* based on close interpretation of the Vedas. Its core tenets were ritualism (orthopraxy) anti-asceticism and anti-mysticism. The early *Mimamsakas* believed in an *adrishta* ("unseen") that is the result of performing *karmas* ("works") and saw no need for an *Ishvara* ("God") in their system. *Mimamsa* persists in some sub-schools of Hinduism today.

**Jains** see their tradition as eternal. Organized **Jainism** can be dated back to *Parshva* who lived in the ninth century BCE, and, more reliably, to *Mahavira*, a teacher of the sixth century BCE, and a contemporary of the Buddha. Jainism is a dualistic religion with the universe made up of matter and souls. The universe, and the matter and souls within it, is eternal and uncreated, and there is no omnipotent creator deity in Jainism. There are, however, "gods" and other spirits who exist within the universe and Jains believe that the soul can attain "godhood"; however, none of these supernatural beings exercise any sort of creative activity or have the capacity or ability to intervene in answers to prayers.

The thoroughly materialistic and antireligious philosophical **Cārvāka** school that originated in India with the *Bārhaspatya-sūtras* (final centuries BCE) is probably the most explicitly atheist school of philosophy in the region (for more on that period, read my essay ***The Arthashastra of Chanakya***). The school grew out of the generic skepticism in the Mauryan period. Already in the sixth century BCE, Ajita Kesakambalin, was quoted in Pali scriptures by the Buddhists with whom he was debating, teaching that "*with the break-up of the body, the wise and the foolish alike are annihilated, destroyed. They do not exist after death.*" *Cārvāka* philosophy is now known principally from its *Astika* and Buddhist opponents. The proper aim of a

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Cārvākan was to *live a prosperous, happy, productive life in this world*. The *Tattvopaplavasimha* of Jayarashi Bhatta (c. 8th century) is sometimes cited as a surviving Cārvāka text. The school appears to have died out sometime around the fifteenth century.

The non-adherence to the notion of a supreme deity or a prime mover is seen by many as a key distinction between **Buddhism** and other religions. While Buddhist traditions do not deny the existence of supernatural beings, it does not ascribe powers, in the typical Western sense, for creation, salvation or judgement, to the "gods"; however, praying to enlightened deities is sometimes seen as leading to some degree of spiritual merit.

Buddhists accept the existence of beings in higher realms, known as *devas*, but they, like humans, are said to be suffering in *samsara* -and not particularly wiser than we are! In fact, the Buddha is often portrayed as a teacher of the deities, and superior to them.

In later Mahayana literature, however, the idea of an eternal, all-pervading, all-knowing, immaculate, uncreated, and deathless *Ground of Being* (the *dharmadhatu*, inherently linked to the *sattvadhatu*, the realm of beings), which is the *Awakened Mind* (*bodhicitta*) or *dharmakaya* ("body of Truth") of the Buddha himself, is attributed to the Buddha in several Mahayana sutras and is found in various *tantras* as well. In some Mahayana texts, such a principle is occasionally presented as manifesting in a more personalized form as a primordial Buddha, such as Samantabhadra, Vajradhara, Vairochana, Amitabha, and Adi-Buddha, among others.

**In Western Classical Antiquity**, theism was the fundamental belief that supported the legitimacy of the state (the *polis*). Historically, any person who did not believe in any deity supported by the state was fair game to accusations of atheism, a capital crime. For political reasons, Socrates in Athens (399 BCE) was accused of being *atheos* ("refusing to acknowledge the gods recognized by the state"), and condemned to death by drinking the hemlock.

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Jacques-Louis David: The Death of Socrates

The roots of **Western philosophy** began in the Greek world in the sixth century BCE. The first Hellenic philosophers were not atheists, but they attempted to explain the world in terms of the processes of nature instead of by mythological accounts. Thus, lightning was the result of "*wind breaking out and parting the clouds*", and earthquakes occurred when "*the earth is considerably altered by heating and cooling*". The early philosophers often criticized traditional religious notions. Xenophanes (6th century BCE) famously said that if cows and horses had hands, "*then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cows like cows*". Another philosopher, Anaxagoras (5th century BCE), claimed that the Sun was "*a fiery mass, larger than the Peloponnese*"; a charge of impiety was brought against him, and he was forced to flee Athens.

The first fully materialistic philosophy was produced by the **atomists** Leucippus and

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Democritus (5th century BCE), who attempted to explain the formation and development of the world in terms of the chance movements of atoms moving in infinite space.

In the fifth century BCE, the **Sophists** began to question many of the traditional assumptions of Greek culture. Prodicus of Ceops was said to have believed that "*it was the things which were serviceable to human life that had been regarded as gods*", and Protagoras stated at the beginning of a book that "*Regarding the gods I am unable to say either that they exist or do not exist*".

In the late fifth century BCE, the Greek lyric poet Diagoras of Melos was sentenced to death in Athens under the charge of being a "godless person" (ἄθεος) after he made fun of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but he fled the city to escape punishment. Later writers have cited Diagoras as the "**first atheist**", but he was probably not an atheist in the modern sense of the word. Somewhat later (c. 300 BCE), the Cyrenaic philosopher Theodorus of Cyrene is supposed to have denied that gods exist and wrote a book *On the Gods* expounding his views.

Also, important in the history of atheism was **Epicurus** (c. 300 BCE). Drawing on the ideas of the Atomists, he espoused a materialistic philosophy wherein the universe was governed by the laws of chance without the need for divine intervention. Although he stated that deities existed, he believed that they were uninterested in human existence. The aim of the Epicureans was to attain peace of mind by exposing fear of divine wrath as irrational. One of the most eloquent expressions of Epicurean thought is Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (1st century BCE) in which he held that gods exist, but argued that religious fear was one the chief cause of human unhappiness and that the gods did not involve themselves in the world. The Epicureans also denied the existence of an afterlife and hence dismissed the fear of death.

Epicureans were not persecuted, but their teachings were controversial and were harshly attacked by the mainstream schools of Stoicism and Neoplatonism.



## Fast Forward to the Middle Ages

**In medieval Islam**, Muslim scholars recognized the idea of atheism and frequently attacked unbelievers. When individuals were accused of atheism, they were usually viewed as heretics rather than proponents of atheism. However, outspoken rationalists and atheists existed, one notable figure being the ninth-century scholar Ibn al-Rawandi, who criticized the notion of religious prophecy -including that of Muhammad, and maintained that religious dogmas were not acceptable to reason and must be rejected. Other critics of religion in the Islamic world include the physician and philosopher Abu Bakr al-Razi a.k.a. Rhazes (865–925), the poet Al-Ma'arri (973–1057), and the scholar Abu Isa al-Warraq (fl. 9th century). Al-Ma'arri, for example, wrote and taught that religion itself was a "*fable invented by the ancients*" and that humans were "*of two sorts: those with brains, but no religion, and those with religion, but no brains.*"

**In the European Middle Ages**, no clear expression of atheism is known. The titular character of the Icelandic saga Hrafnkell (late 13<sup>th</sup> century) says, "*I think it is folly to have faith in gods*". After his temple to Freyr is burnt and he is enslaved, he vows never to perform another sacrifice, a position described in the sagas as *goðlauss* (godless).

**In Christian Europe**, people were persecuted for heresy, especially in countries where the Inquisition was active. The charge of atheism was used to attack political or religious opponents. Pope Boniface VIII, because he insisted on the political supremacy of the church, was accused by his enemies after his death of holding (unlikely) positions such as "*neither believing in the immortality nor incorruptibility of the soul, nor in a life to come*".

During the time of the **Renaissance** and the **Reformation**, criticism of the religious establishment became more frequent in predominantly Christian countries, but did not amount to atheism, *per se*.

The term *athéisme* was coined in France in the sixteenth century. The word "atheist" appears in English books at least as early as 1566. The concept of atheism re-emerged initially as a reaction to the intellectual and religious turmoil of the **Age of Enlightenment** and the Reformation, as a charge used by those who saw the denial of

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god and godlessness in the controversial positions being put forward by others. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word 'atheist' was used exclusively as an insult; nobody wanted to be regarded as an atheist. Although one overtly atheistic compendium known as the *Theophrastus redivivus* was published by an anonymous author in the seventeenth century, atheism was an epithet implying a *lack of moral restraint*.

The Dutch philosopher **Baruch Spinoza** contended in the 17th century that God did not interfere in the running of the world, but rather that natural laws explained the workings of the universe. He was "*probably the first well known 'semi-atheist' to announce himself in a Christian land in the modern era*". Spinoza had been expelled from his synagogue for his protests of the teachings of its rabbis and for failing to attend Saturday services.

In 1661 he published his *Korte Verhandeling van Gog, de mensch en deszelvs welstand* (*Short Treatise on God*) but he was not a popular figure for the first century following his death: "*An unbeliever was expected to be a rebel in almost everything and wicked in all his ways, but here was a virtuous one. He lived the good life and made his living in a useful way. . . It took courage to be a Spinoza or even one of his supporters. If a handful of scholars agreed with his writings, they did not so say in public*" (Blainey).



Baruch Spinoza

How dangerous it was to be accused of being an atheist at that time is illustrated by

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the examples of Étienne Dolet, who was strangled and burned in 1546, and Giulio Cesare Vanini, who received a similar fate in 1619. In 1689 the Polish nobleman Kazimierz Łyszczyński who had denied the existence of God in his philosophical treatise *De non-existentia Dei*, was imprisoned unlawfully; despite the Warsaw Confederation tradition and king Sobieski's intercession, Łyszczyński was condemned to death for atheism and beheaded in Warsaw after his tongue was pulled out with a burning iron and his hands slowly burned. Similarly, in 1766, the French nobleman François-Jean de la Barre, was tortured, beheaded, and his body burned for alleged vandalism of a crucifix -a case that became a cause célèbre because Voltaire tried unsuccessfully to have the judgment reversed.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was also accused of atheism, but he denied it. His theism was unusual, in that he held god to be material. Even earlier, the British playwright and poet Christopher Marlowe (1563–1593) was accused of atheism when a tract denying the divinity of Christ was found in his home. Before he could finish defending himself against the charge, Marlowe was murdered.

In early modern times, the first explicit atheist known by name was the German-language Danish critic of religion Mathias Knutzen (1646–after 1674), who published three atheist writings in 1674.



## The Age of Enlightenment

For centuries in the West, the idea of a morally good atheist struck people as contradictory. Moral goodness was understood primarily in terms of possessing a good conscience, and good conscience was understood in terms of Christian theology. Being a good person meant hearing and intentionally following God's voice (conscience). Since an atheist cannot knowingly recognize the voice of God, he is deaf to God's moral commands, fundamentally and essentially lawless and immoral. But today, it is widely – if not completely – understood that an atheist can indeed be morally good. How did this assumption change? And who helped to change it?



Pierre Bayle (1647-1706).

One of the most important figures in this history is the Huguenot philosopher and historian, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). His *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*

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(1682), nominally dedicated towards taking down erroneous and popular opinions about comets, was a controversial bestseller, and a foundational work for the French Enlightenment. In it, Bayle launches a battery of arguments for the possibility of a virtuous atheist.

*The following text, by Michael W. Hickson, assistant professor of philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, was published on September 18, 2018 in AEON. It has been slightly edited for clarity and stylistic harmony.*

“He begins his apology on behalf of atheists with a then-scandalous observation:

*It is no stranger for an atheist to live virtuously than it is strange for a Christian to live criminally. We see the latter sort of monster all the time, so why should we think the former is impossible?*

Bayle introduces his readers to virtuous atheists of past ages: Diagoras, Theodorus, Euhemerus, Nicanor, Hippo and Epicurus. He notes that the morals of these men were so highly regarded that Christians later were forced to deny that they were atheists to sustain the superstition that atheists were always immoral. From his own age, Bayle introduces the Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini (1585-1619), who had his tongue cut out before being strangled and burned at the stake for denying the existence of God. Of course, those who killed Vanini in such a fine way were not atheists. The pressing question, Bayle suggests, is whether religious believers –and not atheists– can ever be moral.

Bayle concedes that Christians possess true principles about the nature of God and morality (we’ll never know whether Bayle himself was an atheist). But, in our fallen world, people do not act based on their principles. Moral action, which concerns outward behaviour and not inward belief, is motivated by passions, not theories. Pride, self-love, the desire for honor, the pursuit of a good reputation, the fear of punishment, and a thousand customs picked up in one’s family and country, are far more effective springs of action than any theoretical beliefs about a self-created being called God, or the First Cause argument. Bayle writes:

Thus, we see that from the fact that a man has no religion it does not follow necessarily that he will be led to every sort of crime or to every sort of pleasure. It follows only that he will be led to the things to which his temperament and his turn of mind make him sensitive.

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Left alone to act based on their passions and habitual customs, who will act better: an atheist or a Christian? Bayle's opinion is clear from the juxtaposition of chapters devoted to the crimes of Christians and chapters devoted to the virtues of atheists. The cause of the worst crimes of Christians is repeatedly identified as false zeal, a passion that masquerades as the love of God, but that amounts to politico-religious partisanship mixed with hatred of anyone who is different. Bayle's survey of recent religious wars demonstrated in his mind that religious beliefs enflame our more violent tendencies:

*We know the impression made on people's minds by the idea that they are fighting for the preservation of their temples and altars ... how courageous and bold we become when we fixate on the hope of conquering others by means of God's protection, and when we are animated by the natural aversion we have for the enemies of our beliefs.*

Atheists lack false religious zeal, so we can expect them to live quieter lives.

Yet Bayle does not fully establish the possibility of a virtuous atheist. The kind of behaviour that he focuses on is merely superficially good. In Bayle's time, to be truly good was to have a conscience and to follow it. In the *Various Thoughts*, he doesn't declare that atheists can have a good conscience. In fact, Bayle's pessimism reaches its pinnacle in a thought experiment involving a visit from an alien species. Bayle claims that it would take these aliens less than 15 days to conclude that people do not conduct themselves according to the lights of conscience. In other words, very few people in the world are, properly speaking, morally good. So, atheists are merely no worse than religious believers, and, on the surface, they might even appear morally superior. While this is less ambitious than claiming that atheists can be completely virtuous, it is still a milestone in the history of secularism.

Bayle expanded on his *Various Thoughts* twice in his career, once with *Addition to the Various Thoughts on the Comet* (1694) and again with *Continuation of the Various Thoughts on the Comet* (1705). In this latter work, Bayle established the foundations of a completely secular morality according to which atheists could be as morally virtuous as religious believers. He begins his discussion of atheism with the strongest objection he could muster against the possibility of a virtuous atheist:

*Because [atheists] do not believe that an infinitely holy Intelligence commanded*

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*or prohibited anything, they must be persuaded that, considered in itself, no action is either good or bad, and that what we call moral goodness or moral fault depends only on the opinions of men; from which it follows that, by its nature, virtue is not preferable to vice.*

The challenge Bayle undertakes is to explain how atheists, who do not recognize a moral cause of the Universe, can nevertheless recognize any kind of objective morality.

He offers an analogy with mathematics. Atheists and Christians will disagree about the foundation of mathematical truths. Christians believe that God is the source of all truth, while atheists do not. However, metaphysical disagreements over the source of the truth of triangle theorems make no difference when it comes to proving triangle theorems. Christians and atheists all conclude that the sum of the angles inside every triangle is equal to two right angles. For the purposes of mathematics, theological views are irrelevant. Similarly, for morality: whether one believes that the nature of justice is grounded in the nature of God or in the nature of a godless Nature makes no difference. Everyone agrees that justice requires that we keep our promises and return items that we have borrowed.

Bayle's most surprising argument is that Christians and atheists agree about the source of the truths of morality. The clear majority of Christians believe that God is the source of moral truths, and that moral truth is grounded in God's nature, not in God's will or choice. God cannot make killing innocent people a morally good action. Respecting innocent life is a good thing that reflects part of God's very nature. Furthermore, according to Christians, God did not create God's nature: it has always been and always will be what it is.

At bottom, these Christian views do not differ from what atheists believe about the foundation of morality. They believe that the natures of justice, kindness, generosity, courage, prudence and so on are grounded in the nature of the Universe. They are brute objective facts that everyone recognizes by means of conscience. The only difference between Christians and atheists is the kind of 'nature' in which moral truths inhere: Christians say it is a divine nature, while atheists say it is a physical nature. Bayle imagines critics objecting: how can moral truths arise from a merely physical nature? This is indeed a great mystery –but Christians are the first to declare that God's nature is infinitely more mysterious than any physical nature, so they are

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in no better position to clarify the mysterious origins of morality!

According to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, our age became secular when belief in God became one option among many, and when it became clear that the theistic option was not the easiest one to espouse when theorizing about morality and politics. Through his reflections on atheism over three decades, Bayle demonstrated that resting morality on theology was neither necessary nor advantageous. For that reason, Bayle deserves much credit for the secularization of ethics.”



The first book in modern times solely dedicated to promoting atheism was written by French Catholic priest Jean Meslier (1664–1729), whose posthumously published lengthy philosophical essay (*Mémoire des pensées et sentiments de Jean Meslier, prêtre-curé d'Etrépigny et de Balaives, sur une partie des erreurs et des abus de la conduite et du gouvernement des hommes, où l'on voit des démonstrations claires et évidentes de la vanité et de la fausseté de toutes les religions du monde, pour être adressé à ses paroissiens après sa mort et pour leur servir de témoignage de vérité à*

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*eux et à tous leurs semblables*) rejects the concept of god (both in the Christian and also in the Deistic sense), the soul, miracles and the discipline of theology. Philosopher Michel Onfray states that Meslier's work marks the beginning of "*the history of true atheism*".

By the 1770s, atheism in some predominantly Christian countries was ceasing to be a dangerous accusation that required denial and was evolving into a position openly avowed by some. The first open denial of the existence of God and avowal of atheism since classical times may be that of Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789) in his 1770 work, *The System of Nature*. D'Holbach was a Parisian social figure who conducted a famous salon widely attended by many intellectual notables of the day, including Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Benjamin Franklin. Nevertheless, his book was published under a pseudonym, and was banned and publicly burned by the Executioner. Diderot, one of the Enlightenment's most prominent *philosophes* and editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopédie*, which sought to challenge religious, particularly Catholic, dogma said, "*Reason is to the estimation of the philosophe what grace is to the Christian*", he wrote. "*Grace determines the Christian's action; reason the philosophe's*". Diderot was briefly imprisoned for his writing, some of which was banned and burned.

In Scotland, David Hume produced a six-volume history of England in 1754, which gave little attention to God. He implied that if God existed he was impotent in the face of European upheaval. Hume ridiculed miracles, but walked a careful line to avoid being too dismissive of Christianity. With Hume's presence, Edinburgh gained a reputation as a "*haven of atheism*", alarming many ordinary Britons.

The "*culte de la Raison*" developed during the "Terreur" period (1792–94) – the radical stage of the French Revolution. Several Parisian churches were transformed into Temples of Reason, notably the Church of Saint-Paul - Saint-Louis in the Marais. The churches were closed in 1793, mostly after 23 November, when the "Paris Commune" orders the closing of all churches and places of worship in Paris.

*"Atheism seized the pedestal in revolutionary France in the 1790s. The secular symbols replaced the cross. In the cathedral of Notre Dame, the altar, the holy place, was converted into a monument to Reason..."* (Blainey).

The Cult of Reason was a creed based on atheism devised by Jacques Hébert, Pierre-



Gaspard Chaumette, and their supporters. It was stopped by Maximilien Robespierre, a Deist, who instituted the Cult of the Supreme Being. The Cult of Reason was celebrated in a carnival atmosphere of parades, ransacking of churches, ceremonious iconoclasm, in which religious and royal images were defaced, and ceremonies which substituted the "*martyrs of the Revolution*" for Christian martyrs. The earliest public demonstrations took place *en province*, outside Paris, notably by Hébertists in Lyon, but took a further radical turn with the *Fête de la Liberté* ("Festival of Liberty") at Notre-Dame de Paris, 10 November (20 Brumaire) 1793, in ceremonies devised and organized by Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette.

Concurrently, the pamphlet *Answer to Dr. Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1782) is the first published declaration of atheism in Britain—plausibly the first in English (as distinct from covert or cryptically atheist works).

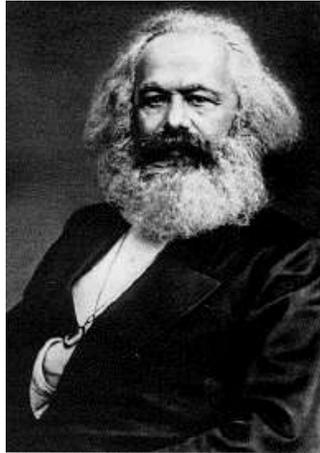
## Nineteenth Century

The French Revolution of 1789 catapulted atheistic thought into political notability in some Western countries and opened the way for the nineteenth century movements of Rationalism, Freethought, and Liberalism.

Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was expelled from England's Oxford University in 1811 for submitting to the Dean an anonymous pamphlet that he wrote entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*. This pamphlet is considered by scholars as the first atheistic tract published in the English language.

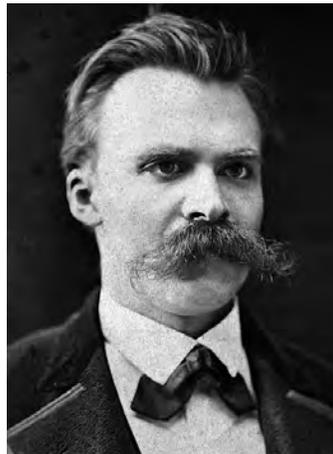
An early atheistic influence in Germany was *The Essence of Christianity* by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). He influenced other German nineteenth century atheistic thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Stirner, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).

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Karl Marx

In 1844, Karl Marx (1818–1883), an atheistic political economist, wrote in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "*Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people*". Marx believed that people turn to religion to dull the pain caused by the reality of social situations. In the same essay, Marx states, "*man creates religion, religion does not create man*".



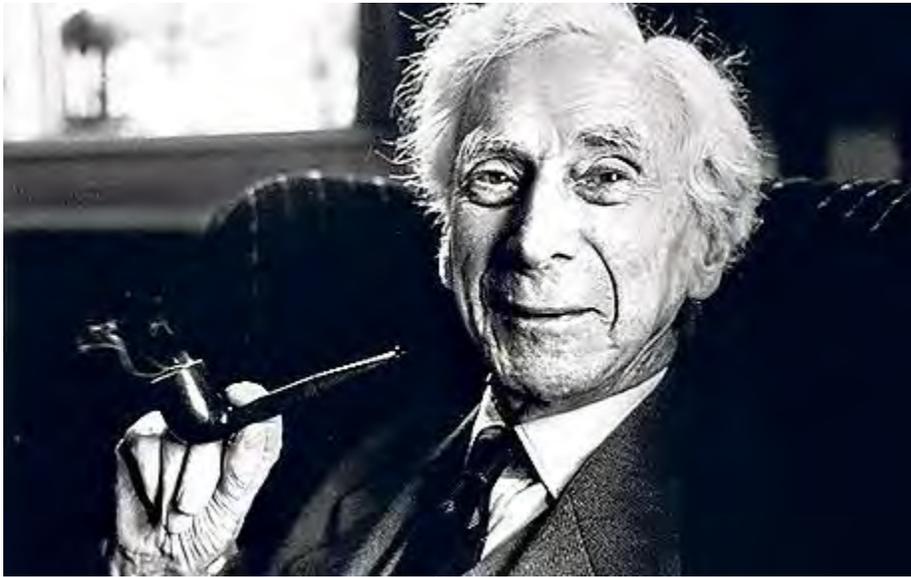
Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent nineteenth century philosopher, is well known for coining the aphorism "***Gott ist tot***" (God is dead), used as a dialogue for the characters in his works. He called for a re-evaluation of old values and a creation of new ones, hoping that in doing so humans would achieve a higher state he labeled the ***Übermensch***.

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**Atheism in the twentieth century** found recognition in a wide variety of other, broader philosophies in the Western tradition, such as existentialism, objectivism, secular humanism, nihilism (feared by Nietzsche!), logical positivism, Marxism, anarchism, feminism, and the general scientific and rationalist movement. Proponents such as Bertrand Russell emphatically rejected belief in God.



Bertrand Russell (1958)

This century also saw the establishment of **state atheism** in the Soviet Union and the communist countries of Eastern Europe, Mao Zedong's China, North Korea, much of Indochina, and Enver Hoxha's Albania. This dogmatic atheism often did not survive the globalism, with its intercommunication and growing appetite for goods.

More recently, the **New Atheism** is advanced by a group of thinkers and writers who advocate the view that superstition, religion, and irrationalism should not simply be tolerated but countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever their influence arises in government, education, and politics. In his book, *Why I am not a Christian* published in 1927, Bertrand Russell put forward similar positions as those espoused by the New Atheists.

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Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett

On September 30, 2007 four prominent atheists (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett) met at Hitchens' residence in Washington, D.C., for a private two-hour unmoderated discussion. The event was videotaped and titled *"The Four Horsemen"*. During *"The God Debate"* in 2010 featuring Christopher Hitchens vs. Dinesh D'Souza, the men were collectively referred to as the *"Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse"*, an allusion to the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation. The four have been described disparagingly as "evangelical atheists".

New atheism is politically engaged in a variety of ways. These include campaigns to draw attention to the biased privileged position religion has and to reduce the influence of religion in the public sphere (which for example in the US, is mandated in the US constitution, under the term "separation of church and state") attempts to promote cultural change (centering, in the United States, on the mainstream acceptance of atheism), and efforts to promote the idea of an "atheist identity". Internal strategic divisions over these issues have also been notable, as are questions about the diversity of the movement in terms of its gender and racial balance.

But many atheists consider these fighters to be atheist fundamentalists, and this aggressive and militant phase of atheism is doing more damage than good. The philosopher Massimo Pigliucci writes: *"What I do object to is the tendency, found*



*among many New Atheists, to expand the definition of science to pretty much encompassing anything that deals with "facts," loosely conceived..., it seems clear to me that most of the New Atheists (except for the professional philosophers among them) pontificate about philosophy very likely without having read a single professional paper in that field.... I would actually go so far as to charge many of the leaders of the New Atheism movement (and, by implication, a good number of their followers) with anti-intellectualism, one mark of which is a lack of respect for the proper significance, value, and methods of another field of intellectual endeavor."*

## How are Atheists Doing Worldwide?

Not too well, but there are signs for hope. Though atheists are in the minority in most countries, they are relatively common in Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, East Asia and present communist states. It is difficult to determine actual atheist numbers. Furthermore, the conflation of terms such as atheist, agnostic, non-religious and non-theist add to confusion among poll data.

According to WIN/Gallup International, in their 2012 poll of 57 countries, 23% of respondents were "*not religious*" and 13% were "*convinced atheists*" and in their 2014 poll of 65 countries 22% were "*not religious*" and 11% were "*convinced atheists*". However, other researchers have advised caution with the WIN/Gallup International figures since other surveys which use the same wording, have conducted many waves for decades, and have a bigger sample size, such as World Values Survey, have consistently reached lower figures for the number of atheists worldwide.

A Pew 2015 global projection study for religion and non-religion projects that between 2010 and 2050 there will be some initial increases of the unaffiliated followed by a decline by 2050 due to lower global fertility rates among this demographic.

The 2015 Pew Religious Landscape survey reported that as of 2014, 22.8% of the **American** population is religiously unaffiliated, atheists made up 3.1% and agnostics made up 4% of the US population.

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*“Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man living in the sky who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time! . . . **But He loves you!**” - George Carlin, 1999*

A survey based on a self-selected sample of biological and physical scientists of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States found that 7% believed in the existence of God, 72.2% did not, and 20.8% were agnostic or had doubts. In 1916, 1,000 leading American scientists were randomly chosen from American Men of Science and 41.8% believed God existed, 41.5% disbelieved, and 16.7% had doubts/did not know; however, when the study was replicated 80 years later using American Men and Women of Science in 1996, results were very much the same with 39.3% believing God exists, 45.3% disbelieved, and 14.5% had doubts/did not know.

A 2014 survey by David Chalmers and David Bourget on nearly 1,000 professional philosophers from 99 leading departments of philosophy shows that 73% considered themselves as atheists, 13% considered themselves as theist, and 13% as something else.

But there are another four countries where the unaffiliated make up the majority of the population: North Korea/DPRK (71%), Japan (57%) [among famous anti-religious figures: Prince Ito Hirobumi, Haruki Murakami, Fukusawa Yukichi], Hong Kong (56%), and China (52%).

Hence atheists, in the USA, are the (small, but seemingly growing) minority.

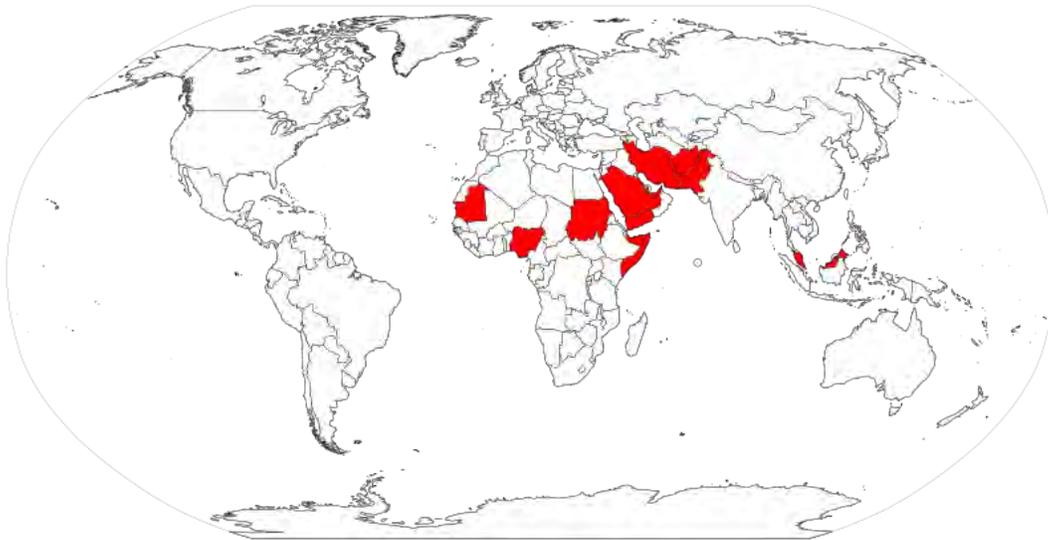
Statistically, atheists are held in poor regard across the globe. Non-atheists, and possibly even fellow atheists, seem to implicitly view atheists as prone to exhibit immoral behaviors ranging from mass murder to not paying at a restaurant. In addition, according to a 2016 Pew Research Center publication, 15% of French people, 45% of Americans, and 99% of Indonesians explicitly believe that a person must believe in God to be moral. Pew furthermore noted that, in a U.S. poll, atheists and Muslims tied for the lowest rating among the major religious demographics on a "*feeling thermometer*". Even if on December 16, 2016, President Barack Obama

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signed H.R. 1150, an amendment to the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, that includes protections for "*non-theistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess or practice any religion at all*", the constitutions of seven "Bible Belt" U.S. states ban atheists from holding public office (however, these laws are unenforceable due to conflicting with the first amendment and article VI of the constitution): Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas; and Pennsylvania that affords special protection to theists.

Discrimination against atheists may also refer to and comprise the negative attitudes towards, prejudice, hostility, hatred, fear, and/or intolerance towards atheists and/or atheism. Because atheism can be defined in various ways, those discriminated against or persecuted on the grounds of being atheists might not have been considered atheists in a different time or place. 13 countries officially punish atheism or apostasy by death. In some Muslim-majority countries, atheists face persecution and severe penalties such as the withdrawal of legal status or, in the case of apostasy, capital punishment. [To those on the map, please add Libya, Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia.]



Map of countries with death penalty for atheists

N.B. *ALL* these countries are full members of the United Nations, and –as such- have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights....



## Live and Let Live

The major risk that atheists face is *intolerance*. Some ‘New Atheists’ have already been accused of extolling a new ‘religion’: *scientism*! The only attitude –that **all** humans should have- is *tolerance*. We cannot, and should not make apartheid a rule. Each human is unique and must be respected and loved as kin. Whatever the creed, the faith, the beliefs, and if these are not imposed on others, they belong to the beholder and must be accepted, respected, protected –even if they feel abhorrent. The best illustration is the *Liberal Decalogue* from the *Autobiography* Bertrand Russell, vol.3: 1944-1969, p. 71-72:

*“Perhaps the essence of the Liberal outlook could be summed up in a new Decalogue, not intended to replace the old one but only to supplement it. The Ten Commandments that, as a teacher, I should wish to promulgate, might be set forth as follows:*

- 1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.*
- 2. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.*
- 3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.*
- 4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.*
- 5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.*
- 6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.*
- 7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.*
- 8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.*
- 9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.*
- 10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.”*



If this Decalogue were to require some spicing up, some vitriol, much more OOMPH! -then refer to Sam Harris' *Manifesto*: <https://samharris.org/an-atheist-manifesto/>. His 12-page articulate, well-documented lampoon is what some may need.

### And soon, a PhD in 'Atheism'

Louis P. Appignani, now an 84-year-old living in Florida, when in college started reading the works of Bertrand Russell; this justified, as Appignani puts it, "*what I deep down believe*". Appignani started his career as a businessman, serving as the president and chairman of the famous Barbizon International modeling and acting school, among other endeavors. In 2001 he turned his focus to atheism, establishing the Appignani Foundation, which supports "*critical thinking*" and "*humanistic values*" and has given grants to organizations such as the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America. Then, in 2016, Appignani through his Foundation endowed a chair for the study of atheism and secularism at the University of Miami, an institution he had long been involved with as a South Florida resident. His \$2.2 million gift to the university marks the first time in American history that a faculty position has been endowed specifically for the study of atheism, and he hopes it will "*legitimize the word 'atheism'*" in the public sphere. The university recently announced that Anjan Chakravartty, a professor of metaphysics and philosophy of science at the University of Notre Dame, will hold the chair.

In the Cold War era, Americans associated atheism with communism—and despite perceptions, particularly in some urban circles, that nonbelief is the norm, the American anti-atheist sentiment has not yet fully disappeared.

As the polls of Americans' presidential preferences reveal, atheists are still largely distrusted in the U.S., although levels of stigmatization range widely depending on where someone lives and what kind of community they're a part of; scholars have argued that this distrust stems from America's history of associating religion with morality and good citizenship.

In a 2014 poll, nearly half of respondents said they would be unhappy if a member of their immediate family married an atheist. It's not surprising, then, that higher education has a long history of atheist professors being pushed out of universities.

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An infamous example is that of Bertrand Russell (coincidentally, the author who catapulted Appignani into atheism), who was banned from teaching at the City College of New York in 1940 amid backlash from religious groups and parents who condemned his views on religion, morality, and sexuality.

Still, it also makes sense that the endowed chair at the University of Miami is part of a larger American narrative in which people—and young people in particular—are moving further and further away from religion. About a quarter of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated today, compared with 6 percent in 1991. Millennials are also three times more likely than the oldest generation of Americans to identify as religiously unaffiliated; today, nearly four in ten people ages 18 through 29 describe themselves as such, according to the Public Religion Research Institute, a rate nearly four times as high as the same age group did in the mid-1980s. Mirroring this trend has been a rise—albeit a gradual one—in interest and support for the academic study of atheism and related topics. Recent examples include a program in secular studies at Pitzer College, as well as the first academic journal on secularism and non-religion, both launched in 2011.

According to Schmidt, the Washington University historian, the growing number of religiously disaffiliated Americans “*provides a background where it is a little bit easier for a university to accept money for a chair with the word atheism in the title.*” Such an initiative, he said, “*would have been a much harder sell*” 50 or 60 years ago.

Yet young Americans who don’t associate with a religion still have complex views on what that identity means -and public interest trends have reflected that complexity. For starters, not all Americans who are religiously unaffiliated see no place in their lives for God or for ritual. A PRRI report in 2017 found that only 14 percent of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated -researchers tend to call them “*nones*” because of the box they check on questions about religious affiliation- identified as atheist. Some “*nones*” are largely indifferent to questions of religion, and still others see a role for religion in their lives; a Pew study conducted in 2014 found that 61 percent of “*nones*” said they believe in God, and that about a third of them said that religion is at least somewhat important to them.

There’s even fragmentation among those who explicitly identify as atheists: when the New Atheism movement began, campus organizations such as the Secular Student Alliance started to grow in popularity, said Stephen LeDrew, a sociologist of

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secularism and atheism. After a while, though, many young people turned away due to what they perceived as the Islamophobia and misogyny of the New Atheist movement, a movement that they expected would align with progressive values. These kinds of concerns are compounded by the fact that self-identified atheists are disproportionately white, male, and highly educated when compared with the general American public.

Indeed, atheists in the United States are –willingly or not– moving the thinking towards Asia or Northern Europe. The economists and politicians should take note. And soon, a new generation of graduates from the University of Miami may give them a harder time.



## Acknowledgements

As you will easily discover, this essay –while intimately personal- is mostly a collage and montage of texts, most quoted *verbatim*. Wikipedia was my main supplier, as referenced. But atheism was sown in my mind very early in life, possibly as early as age 3. Then, after 1947, I attended the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, where Fernand Braudel (history), Emile Chartier a.k.a. Alain (philosophy) and many famous thinkers were teaching. I was fortunate to have Robert Dauvergne (history & geography) as a mentor in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and René Maublanc, writer, editor of *La Pensée* (**the** review on Marxism) as professor of Philosophy; more importantly, from 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I forged a solid, lasting friendship with Henri Cachin (grandson of Marcel Cachin, president of the French Communist Party), and Pierre Denivelle (who moved to Rome, while we to California) whom I managed to meet until their respective (early) deaths; together we had, for decades, endless conversations on politics, social issues, atheism, and much more; we incessantly poked each other, and they helped me ***always question more***.

Yves P. Huin, despite perturbations in his daily life –and a whole host of problems- has been incredibly generous and supportive; he made this website posting what it is.

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N.B.: I reviewed critically most major religions in my essay: [\*Do not Ask the World to change. Change Yourself.\*](#)

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