

## What is Atheism?

Simply put, Atheism is the view that there are no gods – from the Greek, “a”, without; and “theo”, god.

An atheist’s philosophy of life is based on real-world experience and the scientific method, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority and creeds.

This typically results in additional importance being placed on personal responsibility when dealing with people and nature, as there is no god expected to intervene if things go wrong.

Many atheists cite a complete lack of evidence for the existence of gods or other supernatural beings. As well as scientific grounds, atheism can also be based on philosophical, social or historical reasons. However there is no ideology or set of behaviours to which all atheists adhere.

## What about Agnosticism?

Atheism can be compared with agnosticism which holds that the existence of God cannot be logically proved or disproved. The primary difference between atheism and agnosticism lies largely in the continuum between belief and knowledge.

## Varying Degrees of Atheism and Agnosticism

Both Atheism and Agnosticism are sometimes described as having “weak” and “strong” versions:

- **Weak agnosticism:** I don’t have knowledge of a god.
- **Strong agnosticism:** It is not possible for anyone to have knowledge of a god.
- **Weak atheism:** I withhold belief in gods, pending convincing evidence.
- **Strong atheism:** There is already sufficient evidence to be certain that gods do not exist.

These terms are really just for clarity, and many individuals would hold a position somewhere in between any two above, or a variation of one.

## Which gods are atheists against?

A fundamental problem with religion is there is no universally accepted definition of God. For the three Abrahamic religions - Christianity, Islam and Judaism - the term "God" typically refers to a supreme being who created the Universe, and possesses every possible perfection, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence.

Traditional beliefs usually ascribe to God various supernatural powers. The problem for creationists and supporters of “Intelligent Design” (ID) is that the assertion of a supernatural God is a non-falsifiable hypothesis (meaning un-testable). This means that the truth of any statements about this god are indeterminate, and therefore without scientific meaning. That is one reason atheists are against ID being taught in science classes.

To further complicate matters, descriptions of God’s properties and actions are often taken as literally true by some believers, but as merely archaic or metaphorical descriptions by others. The rules for which parts of religious texts can be taken literally or metaphorically are never made clear. Atheists generally find literal descriptions of god untrue, and metaphorical descriptions meaningless in real-world terms.

## But isn’t Atheism evil?

Most people are raised believing in God, so the very idea of them abandoning this imaginary being is often frightening. It can be psychologically difficult to become an atheist due to repetitive religious indoctrination over many years.

There can also be strong social and family pressures against questioning the group’s beliefs too deeply. And believers often wrongly represent atheists as inherently sinful and amoral – which, like so many other regularly repeated religious dogmas, can easily be shown to be entirely false, based on real-world evidence.

## Criticisms of Atheism

What follows is a brief overview of some common criticisms of atheism, which can be grouped into:

- Assessments of its validity,
- Consequences of not believing, and
- The actions of those who are atheists.

## Assessments of its validity

### **"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God" [Psalms 14:1 and 53:1]**

Calling a person a fool does not make them so. The degree of foolishness purely depends on the weight of evidence for or against a stated opinion. There is zero evidence for the existence of god, and massive evidence against.

### **“People who’ve experienced God KNOW that God exists.”**

But if so, which god? People of all religions, as well as atheists with no religion, may sometimes experience transcendental moments. This simply shows that power of the brain to generate strong emotions, sensations and even hallucinations. This, combined with pre-existing expectations, set the stage for religious experiences of every sort.

Internal experiences can certainly feel incredibly profound, and have powerful, long-lasting effects, but are not evidence of a god.

### **"Atheists are just as dogmatic as theists, because atheism is based on assumptions which makes it just another religion."**

Requiring convincing evidence for something before believing it is not an assumption. This is purely rational common-sense. It is dogmatic to insist something exists for which there is no evidence and mountains of evidence against.

Unlike religion, Atheism has no script, dogmatic creed or sacred text to follow. Most people who become atheists do so through their own thinking and investigation.

## Consequences of not believing

### **Pascal's Wager**

French philosopher Blaise Pascal said that a person could "wager" as though God exists, because they have everything to gain, and nothing to lose. The wager makes a number of big assumptions in that it assumes that the person chooses the right god, and that God only rewards belief, not critical thinking.

But Pascal's Wager is wrong when it proposes that religious belief has no cost. Religion wastes time in your limited real life, costs you money when you give it away to churches, and adds real guilt and fear to many individuals' lives.

But most importantly, belief in a non-existent entity can cause harmful decisions to be made based on false assumptions and religiously inspired misinformation. So the premises of the wager are incorrect, and it is better to decide if there is a god based on real-world evidence.

### **Consequences on Society**

A belief in God is said to correlate with improved individual health, happiness and life expectancy. In actual fact, real studies show that the more religious countries have higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy and abortion.

### Actions of those who are atheists

**"Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were all atheists, so their crimes resulted from atheism."**

This tired old claim is demonstrably false:

- Hitler was never an atheist. He was born into a Catholic family, and he never renounced his Catholicism.
- Stalin was an ex-seminary student, who used his country's ingrained subservience to religious authority to further his dictatorial aims.
- Mao's mother was a devout Buddhist and wanted her son to have a religious career. He became a devout Marxist instead.

- Pol Pot, who attended the École Miche, a Catholic school in Phnom Penh, may have become an atheist, but his crimes were not driven by that.

Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were all Marxist-Leninists. All three dictators attempted to control religion to suppress any alternative viewpoint that might threaten their own political personality cults. Their brand of communism was essentially a secular religion that required subservience to "the state" instead of a god.

**"Atheist say that we are all just a bunch of atoms, and that there is no such thing as morality. This means we can all do whatever depravity we like."**

Morality is about living fairly in a society, and treating other people with care and respect. The most atheist societies, as in Scandinavia, are very moral, with low rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and divorce. Basic human morality is actually innate.

## **In Summary**

Atheism is all about understanding and appreciating the Universe as it truly is, rather than how we fantasize it to be. We use science and real-world evidence to inform and guide us.

## **Further Information**

### Reading

- **Sam Harris** – The End of Faith
- **Richard Dawkins** - The God Delusion
- **Daniel C. Dennett** - Breaking the Spell
- **Christopher Hitchens** - God Is Not Great
- **Victor J Stenger** - God: The Failed Hypothesis

### Web Sites

- **Richard Dawkins** - RichardDawkins.net
- **PZ Myers** - scienceblogs.com/pharyngula
- **Skeptics Annotated Bible** - skepticsannotatedbible.com

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