

# What is Atheism?

## Myth 1 Atheism is Just Another Type of Religion

There is a legitimate argument to be had about what it is to call something a religion. Before we go deeper into that question, however, let us begin with someone who thinks that atheism is just another religion. The perfect place to start looking for pretty much anything these days, is – no doubt you expected this – the internet. One blogger has this to say: “I think it’s fair to say that atheism is just another religion, given how certain atheists seem to be about their case. When you debate an atheist it is very much like debating a religious person. They are almost fanatical about their stance.”

In case you would rather have it from a more established source, here is a quote from the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen: “Atheism is every bit of a religious commitment as Christianity itself” (Godfrey, 2010). Or try Jamaica’s Reverend Earlmont Williams:

At the end of the day, expressing no belief in any god, and holding that to be absolute, is basically placing that non-belief on a pedestal, very much like Christians locate their God on the “highest plain”. In essence, atheism itself is unwittingly given divine status. (Williams, 2012)

Sometimes the idea appears in a more restricted form. Consider the popular book *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*, by Christopher Hedges (2008), which was issued in a softcover edition with the title *When Atheism Becomes Religion: America’s New Fundamentalists*. Hedges claims throughout that

atheism is a kind of religion, though he seems unsure whether this applies to all atheism or only to the views of a small group of high-profile contemporary atheists, among them Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens. At one point, he blames much in the way of modern Western thought for bequeathing us a “godless religion,” naming such historical figures as Descartes, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Kant, Diderot, Rousseau, and Paine (Hedges, 2008, p. 17). Never mind that the majority of these were, in fact, not atheists at all. More often, his emphasis is on the creation of a surrogate religion by the contemporary atheists whom he most despises (e.g., Hedges, 2008, pp. 17–18).

But what is meant by a “religion”? For something to be a religion, does it have to be a comprehensive worldview, a system of rituals and canons of conduct, or something else? If it was sufficient for a comprehensive worldview to be called a religion, then many detailed ideologies would have to be considered religions. Arguably a religion needs to be based on belief in some kind of entity or force with supernatural powers.

Michael Martin is one thinker who has wrestled with the problem, pointing out that we could understand religion in different ways (Martin, 2007, pp. 217–220). We could understand it in terms of such indicators as belief in supernatural beings, the identification of sacred objects and the practice of rituals involving them, and an associated moral code. Alternatively, we can understand religion in terms of the questions that it asks and answers, such as those about the fundamental characteristics of human beings and nonhuman reality. On the latter approach, any sufficiently comprehensive and integrated worldview – one with metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological components – might count as a religion.

In fact, the concept of religion itself is by no means unproblematic. There does not seem to be an uncontroversial definition for the purposes of scholarly fields such as anthropology, or for the purposes of the law. William James, in his classic discussion of religious experience, doubted that an exact definition was possible (James, 1982 [1902], pp. 26–52). We might question whether what we know as religion is a single phenomenon at all. Frieder Otto Wolf has recently suggested that the concept of religion is “most deeply imbued and tainted by Euro-centrism and naïve assumptions derived from an often unilaterally simplified Christian tradition.” He adds:

It is, indeed, doubtful that there is any meaningful common denominator between the “everyday magical practices” of an indigenous tribe, Judaic obeisance to the commandments of God to be found in the Tora [sic], the practice of Sunni Islam based on the Qur’an, of Sufi mysticism, of Jainism, of Shintoism, or of Buddhism. (Wolf, 2009, p. 250)

To make matters even more complicated, the oldest societies did not specifically distinguish a religious sphere. In such societies, various spirits and gods were seamlessly continuous with the observed phenomena of nature. Such societies' "religious" beliefs and rituals were tightly interwoven into everyday thought and action, and were not clearly distinguished from nonreligious spheres of activity (Wright, 2009, pp. 17–20).

So is the question, "Just what is a religion?" unanswerable? The concept had better have some content, or scholarly discussions of the phenomenon of religion will lack boundaries; the courts will be unable to decide cases in which they need to work out whether, for example, Scientology is a religion for tax purposes; and claims that atheism is a religion will be simply meaningless. It appears to us that the situation is not hopeless and that some meaning can be given to the "atheism is a religion" claim.

Consider the approach taken by Charles Taylor in his monumental study of the historical secularization of Western societies, *A Secular Age*. Writing mainly of the Abrahamic traditions, Taylor explains religion in terms of belief in an agency or power that transcends the immanent order – by which he means the operations of the natural world. For Taylor, religion relates to "the beyond," to an otherworldly order of things, but not in just any way. He posits three specific dimensions. First, religion asserts that there is some higher good or ultimate end beyond ordinary human flourishing. Second, it includes the possibility of personal transformation, to ensure that the higher good is achieved. This, in turn, involves the existence of a transformative and transcendent power. Third, the religious account of our possible transformation involves a sense of human life extending beyond "this life" (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor's analysis is easily applied to Christianity, where the crucial transformation involves salvation through Jesus Christ (however exactly this is explained by different theological systems). Most of the dimensions described by him are also recognizable in the well-known religions of ancient and modern times. Generally, we think, Taylor's key ideas match rather well with ordinary people's understanding of what "a religion" looks like. A religion typically involves an otherworldly order of things and a related dimension to human lives; an ultimate good that transcends worldly kinds of flourishing; the possibility of spiritual transformation, such as the Christian idea of salvation; and the existence of transcendent and transformative powers, such as the Abrahamic God.

Atheism is not a religion on any of these approaches. For example, it is not a comprehensive worldview, a way of life, or a system of rituals and conduct. As we discussed in our Introduction, it is no more than an informed lack of belief in any god(s) or at most a positive belief that no

god(s) exist. Atheism is compatible with many views of the world. George H. Smith complains, we think rightly, that atheism is not a “way of life,” a “world outlook,” or a “total view of life,” any more than a failure to believe in magic elves is any of these things. While some philosophical positions are atheistic, atheism in itself does not entail any specific system of thought but can be incorporated into many (Smith, 1979, pp. 21–22).

We sympathize, therefore, when Walter Sinnott-Armstrong writes, “most atheists and agnostics do not make their stance on religion central to their lives in the same way as many evangelical Christians do – and should, in their view.” We also know the feeling when he adds: “Except when I am writing books like this, the only time my thoughts turn to religion or God is when religious people raise such issues, such as by confronting me personally or basing public policies on religion” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009, p. xvii).

Arguably, some religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, are atheistic, in that they do not necessarily posit the existence of gods (see Martin, 2007, pp. 224–227). However, they do involve spiritual transformations and elements that are easily regarded as otherworldly or supernatural. By contrast, atheism as such – an informed lack of belief in any God or gods – contains no such elements. It is possible, therefore, that someone could adhere to a religion such as Theravada Buddhism while being an atheist, but atheism itself is not a religion.

## Myth 2 But the Courts Recognize Atheism as a Religion

From time to time the courts have faced the issue of what counts as a religion, or rather, “What, for legal purposes, is a religion?” Like academic scholars, they have struggled to produce an uncontroversial definition. Unsurprisingly, much of the existing case law emphasizes teachings that relate to an otherworldly or supernatural order. On this approach, atheism is not a religion.

Nonetheless, some courts have treated atheism like a religion for certain purposes, and this has led to claims that they consider atheism to be a religion. We will illustrate our take on the issue by means of judgments rendered by the influential United States Supreme Court. One oft-cited case is *Torcaso v. Watkins* (367 U.S. 48 (1961)), involving Roy Torcaso, an atheist whose post as a notary public in Maryland had been revoked because of his refusal to declare a belief in God. Here it was held that the state of Maryland could not require a declaration of belief in God for a person to be able to hold public office. The court reasoned that such a requirement was contrary to the Establishment Clause in the US

Constitution, which forbids the government from establishing a religion. For the purposes of American constitutional law, forbidden government action in breach of the Establishment Clause includes any requirement that advantages the religious against the nonreligious, as was clearly done by Maryland's requirement of belief in God for anyone wishing to become a notary public.

In a footnote, Justice Black listed "Secular Humanism" among "religions" that do not teach the existence of God. However, secular humanism, at least in some of its forms, is a far more comprehensive belief system than mere atheism. Even if secular humanism were a religion, it would not entail the same about atheism. Furthermore, Justice Black's comment was not part of his reasoning necessary for deciding the case, and is thus regarded as *obiter dicta*, rather than as law binding on lower courts (this is noted by Cherry and Matsumura, 1998/9). The important point is that the court did not rule that Mr Torcaso's atheism was itself a religion.

Years later, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled explicitly in the case of *Peloza v. Capistrano Unified School District* (37 F.3d 517 (9th Cir. 1994)), that "evolutionism" and "secular humanism" are not religions for the purposes of the Establishment Clause. Accordingly, Mr Peloza, a high school biology teacher, was unable to demonstrate that he was required to teach a religion when his duties required that he teach evolutionary biology to his students. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal in this case, which thus stands as good law in the United States.

Nonetheless, there are cases (see Davis, 2005) in which atheism has been given some of the same legal protection as religion, and this might even be construed as treating atheism as a religion – at least for certain purposes. One such case is *Kaufman v. McCaughtry* (419 F.3d 678 (7th Cir. 2005)), which involved the rights of an inmate, James Kaufman, within the Wisconsin prison system.

Mr Kaufman invoked the courts to pursue a number of grievances about his treatment by prison officials. One of these was that his First Amendment rights were violated by a refusal to allow him to form a study group for atheist inmates. He intended that the group would study such matters as religious doctrines and practices, apparently from an atheistic perspective. The United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit upheld his claim in this regard, and was thus prepared to treat Kaufman's atheistic view of the world as his religion for the relevant purpose. He was allowed to exercise his "religion" in the sense of forming and conducting the study group.

Such cases suggest that the current myth is at least partly true. For some purposes, in some situations, the US courts will give nonreligious viewpoints the same protection as religious ones. In that limited sense, they may treat even atheism as a religion. It does not follow, however, that the US courts are foolish enough to treat nonbelief as another form of belief. Consider *Wallace v. Jaffree* (472 U.S. 38 (1985)). This case involved a one-minute period of silence in public schools for prayer or meditation. The court made clear that the constitution requires not only equal treatment between different kinds of religious belief, but also equal treatment between belief and nonbelief. It clearly distinguished the right to choose any religious faith, Christian or otherwise, from the right to choose no faith at all (472 U.S. 38, 52–54 (1985)).

The same ideas can be found in other Supreme Court cases, such as *Engel v. Vitale* (370 U.S. 421, 435 (1962)) and *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Chapter* (492 U.S. 573, 610 (1989)). A more recent case was *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union* (545 U.S. 844 (2005)), which involved official displays of the Ten Commandments. Throughout this developing body of jurisprudence, the United States Supreme Court has been clear that the First Amendment rules out any favoring of religion over irreligion, as well as any favoring of one religion over another. Irreligion is not thought of here as just another form of religion, even though it receives constitutional protection.

In short, the US courts treat nonbelief with the same protection that they give to belief, at least where relevant. It does not follow, however, that atheism is a religion for legal purposes, even in the United States. Indeed, it would normally fall under the concept of “irreligion” – something that is not to be subordinated to “religion.” In any event, whatever the stance of the American courts it does not follow that the courts of other countries will take the same approach.

Once again, the crucial conceptual point we wish to make is this: a lack of belief is not simply *the same* as a form of belief. Atheism requires no more than a lack of belief in any God or gods, and this distinguishes it from typical religions, with their rich creeds, doctrines, rituals, and other practices.

### **Myth 3**   Atheists Believe in God but are in Denial

This claim overlaps to some extent with the myth that atheists hate God, because in order to hate God you also need to believe that God exists. We must be careful here with regard to what we take this myth to mean.

If we take it to mean that there are self-professed atheists (people who claim to be atheists) who secretly believe in a god, then it is plausible enough, if trivial. Surely there will be people out there who claim to be atheists when really they believe in a god of a kind, just as there have been Christian ministers who were actually atheists. Most historically prominent of the latter, perhaps, was the seventeenth-century cleric Jean Meslier (see Meslier, 2009 [1729]). For more modern examples, consult the stories of Dan Barker (2008) and John W. Loftus (2012a).

Michael Martin (1996) evaluates, and argues against, a strong version of the myth, namely the claim that no atheists exist (a proposition put forward in Van Til, 1969). As Martin points out, even if some phenomenon, such as morality or the efficacy of logic, could only be explained on a theistic basis it would not follow that atheists actually believe in the existence of God.

Some Christian apologists have speculated about what might motivate professed atheists to be not really atheistic in their worldviews. One good example is a YouTube video that you should be able to access on the internet if you feel so inclined. The narrator aims to demonstrate that we all really believe in God, but that atheists remain in denial for their own nefarious purposes (Lawley, 2009).

Dinesh D'Souza's book *What's So Great About Christianity* provides us with an example as good as any of a high-handed approach by a Christian apologist with pretensions to moral expertise. D'Souza claims that atheism's appeal is being able to escape from moral requirements, since atheists do not believe in Hell or divine judgment (D'Souza, 2007, pp. 268–270). This might, in turn, motivate some of us to deny what is supposedly obvious, namely the existence of God. Ironically enough, D'Souza has himself been in some disgrace among many of his conservative Christian colleagues over his own apparent lapses from a strict Christian sexual morality. This led to his resignation as President of The King's College in New York in October 2012. So it goes.

But why should fear of an afterlife lead to atheism? There are also theistic positions that reject the idea of divine judgment and particularly that of Hell. Why not be motivated to adopt one of those positions, especially if the existence of God is so obvious? If belief were simply volitional – if we could decide at will what to believe, and could adopt whatever beliefs seemed “nicest” or most convenient – we would probably move to some kind of liberal religious position that teaches a doctrine of universal salvation. On such an account, everyone ends up in Heaven, with sins forgiven by a loving God. Compared to this, atheism would surely come a distant second.



The fact is, however, that atheists have many other reasons to reject religious claims. Some atheists do indeed reject many moral strictures that have been favored by Christian churches, but this is usually based on the perception that the strictures lack rational justification.

In his 2007 encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledges a distinctively moral element in modern atheism:

The atheism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is – in its origins and aims – a type of moralism: a protest against the injustices of the world and of world history. A world marked by so much injustice, innocent suffering, and cynicism of power cannot be the work of a good God. A God with responsibility for such a world would not be a just God, much less a good God. It is for the sake of morality that this God has to be contested. (Benedict, 2007)

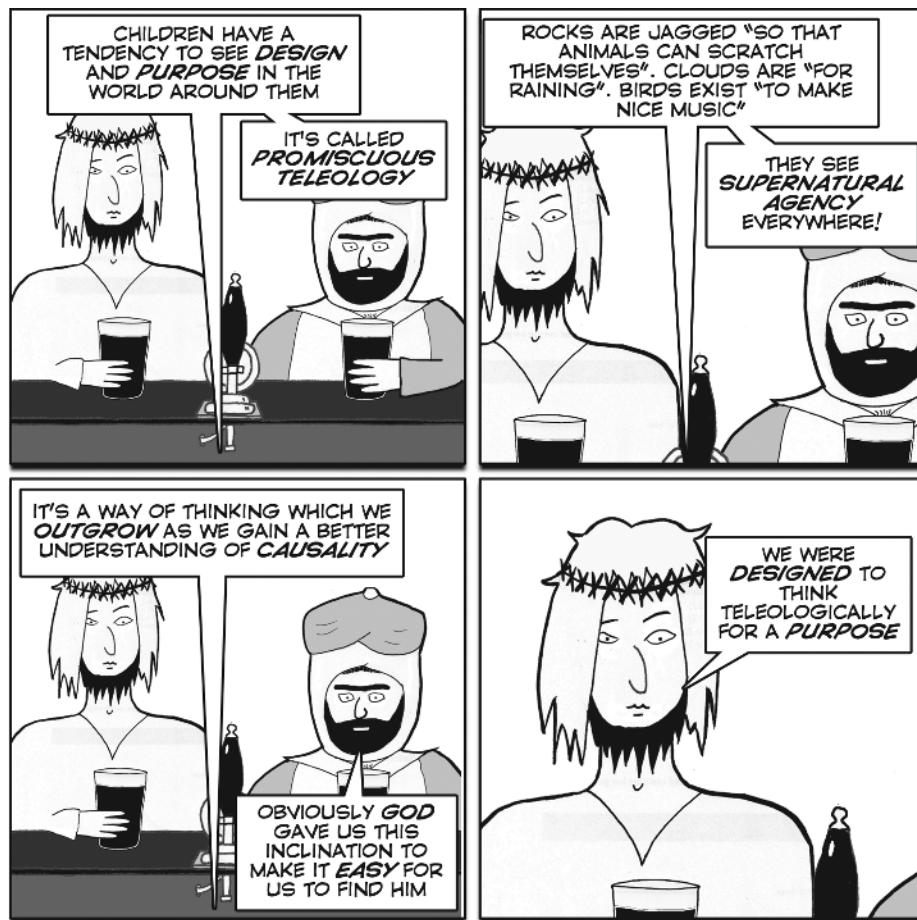
D’Souza, too, acknowledges that one factor motivating atheism is incomprehension at the suffering and other evils in the world, which cannot be reconciled in any straightforward way with the existence of a benevolent and all-powerful deity (D’Souza, 2007, pp. 271–276). Atheists do, of course, deny many religious claims – for example, Aikin and Talisse offer a long list of claims that atheists reject (Aikin and Talisse, 2011, pp. 48–49) – but that does not mean that we are in denial.

One way of making the claim in this myth is to suggest that belief in God is biologically determined or neurologically based. The grain of truth here may be that there are aspects of human psychology that lead us to attribute agency to inanimate things, and this may feed into religion (e.g., Guthrie, 2007, pp. 291–296). However, even if there are aspects of human psychology that incline toward belief in gods, they cannot be determinative. That should not be surprising, since we are quite capable of understanding that inanimate things are not actually animate. The notion that some aspect of our psychology makes theism inevitable becomes implausible when we consider the sheer number of atheists in the world – surely they are not *all* “really” theists! According to Phil Zuckerman, conservative estimates are that there exist between 500 million to 750 million atheists worldwide (Zuckerman, 2007).

Traditional religious institutions have experienced significant declines in both membership and church attendance. For instance, in Britain a decline in the rate of affiliation with traditional religious institutions has not been countered by a rising rate of membership in nontraditional institutions (Bruce, 2001), and 50 years of polling reveals that an actual decline in religious beliefs shadows the drop in participation.



A 2011 survey shows seemingly contradictory results. When asked in a survey “What is your religion?” 61% of people in England and Wales ticked a religious box (53.48% Christian and 7.22% Other), while 39% ticked “No religion.” One could easily interpret this as indicative of Britain remaining a predominantly religious country. However, the same survey asked this follow-up question: “Are you religious?” Only 29% of the same people surveyed said “yes,” while 65% answered “no.” Much hinges, then, on how one interprets religious identification, when those who identify with a religion indicate in a strong majority that they do not consider themselves religious (British Humanist Association, 2011).



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In line with these findings, Georges Rey and Adele Mercier have argued that most so-called theists in the West, at some level, do not really believe in God (Rey, 2007; Mercier, 2009). They claim that anyone who has been exposed to a typical Anglo-European secondary school education will hold a quasi-atheist position. This is one in which an individual may express religious beliefs, but is actually self-deceived. At some psychological level, that is, such individuals do not regard their religious beliefs as true. Even if Rey and Mercier have overstated the case, the theism of many self-declared believers does not go as deep as critics of atheism like to think it does.

Many of us do not believe in the existence of any being that resembles the Abrahamic God or the polytheistic gods of, say, Greek and Norse mythology. We see no good evidence that such beings exist, or that any other beings that could be called “gods” are more than fictional characters. On the contrary, we think that the evidence points the other way. Why not take our word for this? If most or all atheists really believed in God, one might question whether it was a good investment of time by so many prominent theists from St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas to Leibniz, and through to the present day, to engage in a time-consuming and futile quest to prove God’s existence.

#### **Myth 4    Atheists are Certain There is No God**

We wonder whether the myth of the dogmatically confident atheist is a deliberate attempt by religious apologists to suggest that atheists are somehow overreaching in their claims. This allegedly dogmatic stance can then be juxtaposed with a liberal, kind-hearted, less-oppressive-than-usual religion.

Eric Reitan, for instance, claims that the form of religion which he advocates is based on hope – a hope that there is a good, transcendent being who somehow redeems all the horrors of the world. He acknowledges that religious groups throughout history have, in fact, claimed certainty: they have “attempted to preserve the illusion of certainty by remorselessly persecuting every ‘heretic’ whose differing beliefs might threaten that illusion.” Nonetheless, he reports that most of the religious people *he* knows accept that they do not possess knowledge, but only hope, and that their beliefs are not beyond dispute (Reitan, 2009, p. 211). By contrast, so he asserts, it is atheists, or at least some of them, who claim certainty (Reitan, 2009, pp. 211–212). This certainty is of concern, epistemologically, because atheists are unable to prove, logically or otherwise, that the God of major monotheistic religions does not actually exist.

What should we make of this argument? First, it should be conceded in fairness that not all religions have been persecutory, though the Abrahamic monotheisms have been more so than most (e.g. Blackford, 2012, pp. 20–33). We should also take note of Reitan’s suggestion that human beings have a hunger for certainty, something that is useful in practical situations (such as knowing whether there are rabid wolves in the forest). He adds that this relates poorly to issues concerning the ultimate nature of the universe (Reitan, 2009, p. 211). That may well be so, but it does not detract from the fact that many religious organizations and leaders have historically claimed certainty about such things to the point of imposing their beliefs and canons of conduct through exercises of violence and power. If you are doubtful about this claim, consider Karlheinz Deschner’s magisterial study *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*. Deschner, a German historian, dedicated his nine-volume magnum opus to writing the criminal history of Christian churches (Deschner, 1986–2008).

The suggestion that religion is open to uncertainty, while atheism is the opposite, distorts humanity’s historical experience with both.

Perhaps we need harp no further on the dogmatism that is often shown by religious believers and their leaders – but what about atheists? Given the minimalistic definition adopted for the purposes of this book, atheists are simply people who lack belief in any god or gods. We atheists need not even make a positive claim that no gods exist, let alone that our claim is objectively justified in some way. Some atheists do make a stronger claim: they claim that no gods exist and that this is a conclusion sufficiently supported by argument and evidence to count as knowledge. Even that, however, is not the same as a claim to certainty – that is, a belief that is, or should be, held without doubt. The nature of scientific, naturalistic inquiry precludes any such certainty. Falsification still reigns supreme, and scientific findings are always regarded as provisional.

Even where an atheist claims knowledge, that is no more than a claim that a certain belief is *justified* and *true* (and, perhaps, that it tracks the evidence in an appropriate way), not that it is established beyond all doubt. Atheism is not based on a claim to certainty, and there are actually very few things about which we can be certain. Nonetheless, there are many things that we can be *confident* about: for example, very few living people believe in the existence of Zeus; most of us are quite confident that he does not exist, even though there is no absolute certainty of it. We can also be confident about many well-established scientific findings, such as the basics of evolutionary theory and the heliocentric picture of the solar system.

A qualification that should be added here, however, is that some particular conceptions of God may turn out to be self-contradictory or otherwise too vague or incoherent to be true. Where that can be demonstrated to be the case to the satisfaction of a particular atheist, he or she may, indeed, feel certain that this particular god does not exist. But that can apply to any set of claims that is vague, incoherent, or just plain internally inconsistent.

While atheists do not generally claim certainty with regard to the (non) existence of gods or God, some atheists are clearly pretty confident and forthright, and may even be sure of their positions beyond any kind of doubt that they consider reasonable. But even this does not make them dangerous in the way that Reitan suggests when he discusses the work of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. It is worth dwelling on Reitan's accusation for a moment to see just how far the myth about atheism and certainty can be taken: "And in a different world, under different conditions, the false certainty that fuels the rabid atheism of Dawkins and Hitchens and Harris might have inspired a crusade against religion far more bloody than the crusade of words they now pursue" (Reitan, 2009, p. 212).

The rhetoric here is both unfair and irresponsible. There is neither a historical case nor current-day evidence to support this sort of excited hand-waving. Reitan insinuates a relationship between his targets ("Dawkins and Hitchens and Harris") and such ideas as disease ("rabid"), violence, and fanaticism. Never mind, that these people have never called for persecution of religion or the imposition of their own views on the world. By means of a metaphor of religious warfare ("crusade"), Reitan suggests that forthright, confident criticism of religion is akin to the acts of invasion and slaughter Christianity has become notorious for (Riley-Smith, 1999). This is not merely the inadvertent use of lazy metaphors. Rather, Reitan piles on this language, suggesting on the same page that Hitchens's book *God is Not Great* is drenched in "aggressive self-righteousness," and that this is caused by the aforementioned false certainty, which also leads to "battle lines being drawn," "joyous delight in stomping all over what others find sacred," "grinding" others' reverent feelings "underfoot," and such overt acts as the destruction of Afghanistan's giant Buddha statues by the Taliban (Reitan, 2009, p. 212).

As a matter of fact, neither Dawkins nor Hitchens nor Harris has recommended any actual stomping, grinding, or destruction of statues. But the impression is created that they are driven by a false certainty which motivates them to behave with Talibanesque fanaticism. All these particular atheists have done is set out their arguments in books, speeches,

and the like, doubtless wording them in trenchant, sometimes humorous, ways, but never resorting to force or proposing the use of force. Whatever iconoclasm they have displayed has been metaphorical. There is no evidence to conclude that certain atheists are particularly radical or prone to incite violence. Generally, we are peaceful people, and most of us are painfully aware of our own epistemic limitations.

## **Myth 5    Atheists Hate or are Angry with God**

This common myth appears in a news story by Miles Godfrey, covering a number of attacks on atheism by church leaders in Australia. Here, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, has this to say on the supposed atheistic hatred of God: “as we can see by the sheer passion and virulence of the atheist – they seem to hate the Christian God.” He then elaborates his views in even stronger terms: atheism, he says:

represents the latest version of the human assault on God, born out of resentment that we do not in fact rule the world and that God calls on us to submit our lives to him . . . . It is a form of idolatry in which we worship ourselves. (Godfrey, 2010)

Well, do atheists hate, or are we angry with, God?

Let us start with a pretty obvious point: atheists cannot be angry with God, and we cannot even resent God, as Archbishop Jensen claims we do, because we do not believe God actually exists. How could you hate or resent something you do not think exists? That would be a pretty pointless activity. The claim that we are angry with God can be seen as wishful thinking.

It might suit Jensen and like-minded religious figureheads if we were not sincere or serious in our view that God does not exist. Robert T. Lee is one critic of atheists who makes this quite explicit. He argues that atheists “think since they deny the existence of God, they cannot hate Him. But it’s really the other way around: they know He exists, that’s why they hate Him” (Lee, 2004). It goes without saying, perhaps, that this kind of logic is question-begging. From an atheistic viewpoint, the various gods worshiped by Christians and others are essentially fictional or mythological characters. Why hate them?

Of course, that does not prevent atheists from viewing the Abrahamic God, as depicted for example in various books of the Bible, as a most unattractive character. It is easy to see this being as loving vengeance and warfare, as being prurient in its obsession with matters of sex, and as especially repulsive in its demands for endless praise and worship,

and in its requirement of blood sacrifice before forgiving sins. For that reason, many atheists are glad not to live in a world that contains this being. Such a world is clearly not the same as one created and ruled by a truly benevolent deity. Unfortunately, we appear not to be living in *that* world either.

Thus there is a religious cottage industry devoted to explaining (away) the evil that exists in our world despite the presence of a benevolent God, who supposedly created it. Theologians call this the theodicy problem (often referred to as the Problem of Evil). How can it be that there is so much evil existing in a world they believe has been created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and benevolent deity? The obvious answer is that there simply is no such deity.

Atheists tend to find the religious answers to such questions contrived or unsatisfying. That is not, however, the same as hating an actual being – God. Nor do atheists tend to hate historical or legendary figures, such as Jesus, any more than other such figures about whom little is known with certainty. Some atheists are critical of the moral character of Jesus as depicted in the traditionally accepted Gospels (e.g., Tooley, 2009), but that should not be confused with hatred.

More generally, there is a tendency for religious apologists to blur the distinction between harsh criticism and expressions of hatred. For example, Alister McGrath comments, not exactly in a charitable spirit, on Richard Dawkins: “Dawkins preaches to his god-hating choirs, who are clearly expected to relish his rhetorical salvos, and raise their hands in adulation” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath, 2007, p. x). Similarly, Patrick Madrid and Kenneth Hensley write, referring to atheists, “They hate the idea of God, and thus, they hate the idea that some people would believe in Him” (Madrid and Hensley, 2010, p.12). A recent article by Alvin Plantinga provides a rather worrying example:

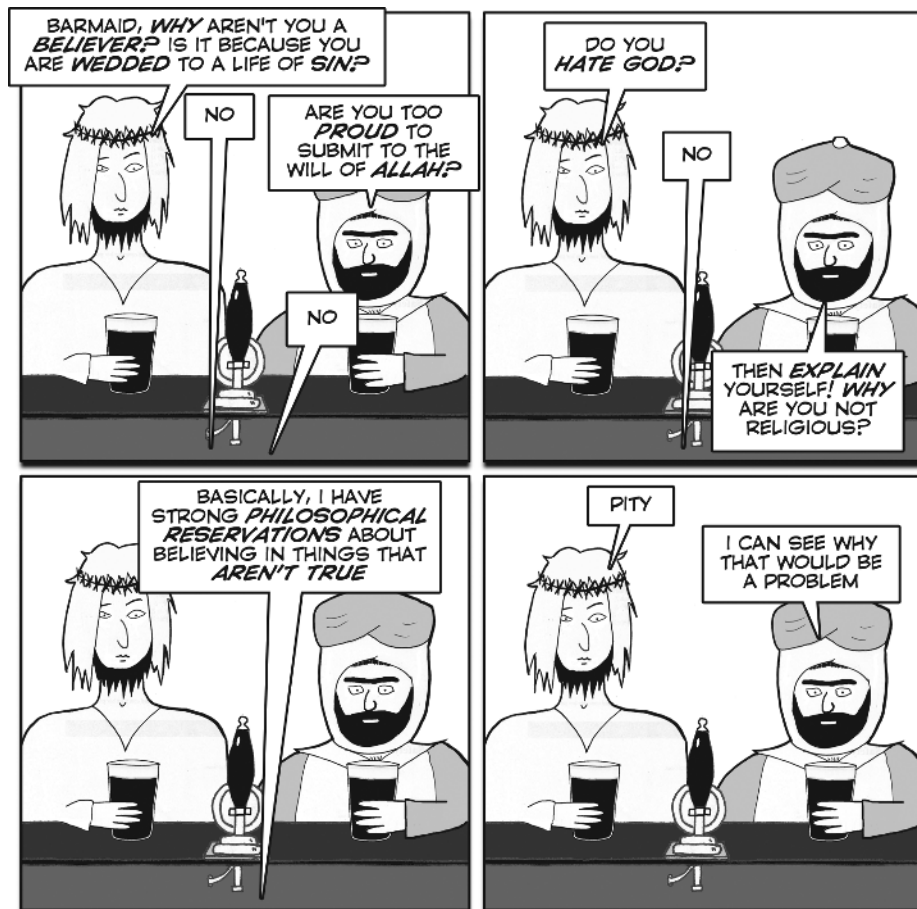
As everyone knows, there has been a recent spate of books attacking Christian belief and religion in general. Some of these books are little more than screeds, long on vituperation but short on reasoning, long on name-calling but short on competence, long on righteous indignation but short on good sense; for the most part they are driven by hatred rather than logic. (Plantinga, 2008)

What is disconcerting here is that many such accusations of “hatred” do not even specify hatred of a supernatural (or imaginary) being. This kind of language is problematic, because it is only a small step away from characterizing your opponents as motivated by hatred to calling for their speech to be suppressed and for stigmatizing them as enemies of



the social order. Indeed, this is the objective of a long-running campaign fought vigorously by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. This organization has campaigned for the recognition by the United Nations Human Rights Council that the defamation of religion constitutes a human rights violation. Had the Islamic countries in the Council succeeded with what in effect would have justified censorship of criticism of religion in the name of human rights, countries such as Pakistan with its draconian blasphemy laws could have legitimately claimed that their laws are human rights-compliant (Reuters, 2011). Though the campaign seemed to falter in 2011, it revives with each new controversy involving “blasphemous” acts.

Interestingly, and not surprisingly perhaps, surveys suggest that religious believers are often angry with the God they believe in. A study undertaken



Credited to Jesus and Mo, [www.jesusandmo.net](http://www.jesusandmo.net)



by Julie Exline and colleagues found that between one-third and two-thirds of religious people surveyed in the USA conceded being angry with their respective gods. The reason most frequently mentioned is that they feel let down by God, usually in the aftermath of a major health scare or other personal tragedy that he did not prevent (Exline *et al.*, 2011).

It is perhaps worth noting that *even if* atheists really were angry with God that would tell us nothing with regard to the question of whether or not atheism is true or false. This myth really is a curiously *ad hominem* kind of argument.

### Myth 6 Atheism is a Rebellion Against God's Authority

As George H. Smith mentions, atheists are often accused of being in some sort of neurotic rebellion, especially if the atheist concerned is young. Smith notes, however, that atheists cannot win once this approach is taken – a middle-aged atheist can be accused of such things as “the frustration of daily routine, the bitterness of failure, or . . . alienation from oneself and one's fellow man.” If the atheist is old, the accusation can relate to “the disillusionment, cynicism and loneliness that sometimes accompany one's later years” (Smith, 1979, p. 24). All of this is question-begging since neither youth nor old age is evidence of any kind of neurotic response to the God question. Speculations about states of mind get us nowhere.

Still, they keep coming. Dinesh D'Souza, for instance, claims that the real reason why people reject theism is that it excuses what he regards as sexual immorality – people become atheists because they do not wish to imagine God's judgment for their sins of adultery and general lechery. For D'Souza, contemporary atheism is “a pelvic revolt against God,” and “The orgasm has become today's secular sacrament.” He adds that atheism is needed to pave the way for women to have abortions, since, so he thinks, unhooking sexuality from traditional moral restraints will produce numerous unwanted pregnancies. Thus abortion is “atheism's second sacrament.” He suggests that it must produce terrible guilt for any woman who is morally healthy to “kill her own unborn child,” and that atheism is needed to obviate that guilt (D'Souza, 2007, pp. 268–270). A similar line of reasoning is developed at length by philosopher-theologian James Spiegel, in his not-so-subtly titled book *The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief* (2010).

D'Souza and Spiegel must assume the truth of their beliefs in order to sustain this line of argument, and in that sense they are begging the question at hand. For example, a straightforward secular ethical argument in favor of abortion rights could deny most of what D'Souza takes as a

given, namely that the abortion of a fetus is equivalent to the killing of an actual child (Warren, 1998). Once that proposition is denied, it is far from clear that women undertaking an abortion would have good reason to feel terrible guilt – that is, moral guilt beyond what is projected on them by Christian apologists such as D’Souza. Most abortions take place before the fetus is sufficiently developed to experience pain, so the guilt cannot be based on sympathy toward another living, sentient being.

Doubtless there is more to say here, particularly about the actual emotions experienced by women who have abortions (often these are feelings of relief). However, D’Souza cannot simply rely on emotional responses to abortion that may be shared by some of his readers. These will most certainly not be shared by others.

If guided by reason, compassion will side in most instances with a woman who needs an abortion, and will oppose laws that attempt to prevent women having abortions. It is, in fact, the antiabortion position that lacks compassion: it neglects the interests of a pregnant woman who does not wish to be a mother – and may have very good reasons for her preference. In some cases, we are talking about rape victims. In others, the woman may actually be a frightened teenager whose future prospects will be damaged irreparably if she goes ahead with a pregnancy at this stage of her life. Women face many situations in which they consider the possibility of an abortion, and they usually do not make these decisions lightly. This exposes why many of us reject what D’Souza and other Christian conservatives hold out as Christian morality: it is arbitrary and cruel.

The same can be said about another of D’Souza’s examples, euthanasia, by which he seems to have in mind physician-assisted suicide. But how can *this* be described as callous? Euthanasia, etymologically meaning “good death,” is usually understood as relating to the suffering of competent patients who often face inevitable death from diseases such as cancer, and – crucially – who themselves have made the determination that their lives are not worth living to them. Some patients may find themselves in awful situations, but they are too debilitated to end their own lives. Is it “compassionate” to require them to live on against their own wishes, knowing the ongoing suffering that they must endure, and no matter what legislative safeguards can be put in place to deter abuses and obviate fears (Schüklenk *et al.*, 2011)?

To many atheists – and others who support carefully regulated access to voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide – it is the policies of the churches that appear cruel, driven more by supernaturalist concepts that human lives are in the hands of God than by concern for the welfare of human

beings who are trapped in awful situations. From that point of view, D'Souza's complaints about callousness and compassion are offensive. It is one thing for Roman Catholicism to insist that there is a redemptive value in human suffering; it is quite another to insist that multicultural societies should abide by such implausible dictates. The religious morality that D'Souza espouses detects a kind of redemption and holiness in suffering, helplessness, and misery. But where is the redemptive value in suffering unnecessarily toward the end of our lives? Your average atheist cannot see it, and for good reason.

Christian apologists often seem led astray by their own sense of righteousness. As a result, they misunderstand the straightforward relationship between the widely accepted value of compassion and the moral standards advocated by many atheist thinkers.

At this stage, it is worth asking the question whether such apologists' claims contain any grain of truth. Perhaps they do point to something true, but in a way that is very different from what they imagine. Far from atheists trying to fool themselves that God does not exist so they can reject certain strictures of traditional morality, they may begin with a strong intuition that those strictures are irrational, arbitrary, and cruel. To be fair, that is evidently not a sufficient reason to believe that God does not exist: we could consistently postulate that God exists while also holding that there is nothing wrong with such things as contraception, abortion, and homosexual conduct. This stance is taken by much of contemporary theology, which rejects conservative Christian views of these and related social matters. However, the problem is more indirect – as long as churches and sects issue moral edicts that appear largely irrational, when judged by secular standards, their credibility is undermined.

For many of us, the moral norms advocated by morally conservative theists do not look like the edicts of a superlatively wise and benevolent being, but more like relics from a less enlightened era. At best, some of them may have made sense as standards of behavior in earlier social circumstances, but they make little or no sense now. Once we reach that point, holy books, traditional teachings, and official pronouncements from religious organizations appear unlikely to be divinely inspired. That, in turn, casts doubt on their authority in other matters such as claims about the existence and character of supernatural beings.

Again, this may not in itself be the strongest reason for atheism, but the appearance that holy books and religious institutions are fallible human constructions converges with many other considerations that we'll be discussing. Taken together, these can, quite reasonably lead to the conclusion that supernatural beings do not exist. The bottom line with

this myth is that atheism need not be based on disillusionment, cynicism, loneliness, or even an affirmation of sexual freedom. It is a sincere intellectual position.

## **Myth 7   Atheists See No Good in Religion**

It is true that atheists do not see theistic religions as providing superior normative frameworks in which to live our lives. Nor do we consider it necessary to find guidance in the commands of a supreme being, the decisions of a religious organization or its leaders, or the text of a holy book. That does not mean that we never see any good in religion. Atheists can differ over issues like that.

As mentioned throughout this book, many atheists are philosophical naturalists. As such, they reject the existence of any supernatural agencies or powers, but not, for example, the findings of methodologically sound sociological research. There would be no reason for philosophical naturalists to deny that religion can provide some, or even many, people with a sense of community. Likewise, they can accept findings indicating that strongly religious people find their impending death easier to accept than others, though not necessarily more so than intellectually committed atheists. On these, you might want to refer to our treatment of Myths 18, 48, and 49.

Depending on atheists' moral convictions they might appreciate some of the work religious charities undertake in developing countries. However, atheists might be troubled by this good work being mixed up with religious organizations' attempts to convert impoverished or otherwise vulnerable people to their particular ideologies. The Catholic charities providing health care in certain parts of sub-Saharan Africa give us a good example of the darker side of religious aid-giving activities. They really do care for people with AIDS and other illnesses, but that does not prevent them from telling their patients that they should not use condoms. Thus they endanger people's lives and welfare because of God's supposed disapprobation of condom use during sexual intercourse. Or again, what would *you* make of an evangelical charity devoted to helping Iraqi refugees to settle into the USA when it refuses to hire a Muslim because he is of the wrong faith (Turnbull, 2010)?

All too often, when it comes to the good of religion there is a flip-side. Acknowledging this is not denying the good done by religious people, even if for the wrong reasons, and even if done with – from our perspective – ulterior motives. We cannot think of a single instance where religiously motivated activities are unequivocally positive. There is

virtually always a “but” – think of the disastrous reign of Mother Teresa in India. Christopher Hitchens’s book, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, shows that the good work done there from religious motives was anything but good; or, at a minimum, it could have been much better if Mother Teresa had not been fanatically preoccupied with her own delusions about the wonders of poverty and the redemptive value of human suffering (Hitchens, 1997).

Atheists are not necessarily hostile to all religion, and we need not be hostile to religious people, just as Jews need not be hostile to Hindus, Christians need not be hostile to Jews, and so on (Baggini, 2003, p. 92). People are complex, and there is usually far more to them than their views about otherworldly agencies and powers. We should not judge them solely on that dimension.

Religion can sometimes be all-consuming; it can turn to fanaticism and authoritarianism. But that doesn’t make all religious people fanatics and authoritarians, any more than atheists are. By and large, atheists know this and will treat people on their merits as individuals. Shouldn’t we all take that attitude?

## Myth 8 No Atheist Believes in Anything Supernatural

As an addendum to the previous “myth,” it is worth noting that most philosophically minded atheists, including the authors of this book, do not believe in supernatural entities, realms (such as Heaven and Hell), forces, and so on. Some of the same considerations that lead atheists to reject belief in gods may lead them not to believe in, for example, ghosts, evil spirits, astral influences, reincarnation, or any sort of afterlife. As Julian Baggini puts the point, atheism “is usually accompanied by a broader rejection of any supernatural or transcendental reality” (2003, p. 3) In other words, there is a strong tendency for atheists to be philosophical naturalists, people who do not believe in anything supernatural or “spooky.”

All that said, we atheists differ among ourselves in many ways. Some do believe in supernatural or scientifically anomalous phenomena of various sorts. We have, for example, met atheists who believe in ghosts or who take astrology seriously. Technically, this is possible, since atheism is merely disbelief in God (the deity of monotheistic religions such as Christianity) and other beings that can reasonably be thought of as gods. Indeed, some well-known religions are atheistic or at least open to atheistic interpretations. Religious adherents who interpret their traditions atheistically may nonetheless make various supernatural or otherworldly

claims, such as claims about a cycle of death and spiritual rebirth, without postulating the existence of any intelligent beings that would qualify as gods.

### **Myth 9    It Makes No Sense for an Atheist to Practice Any Kind of Religion**

Is this really a myth, or is it the truth? That depends to a large extent on one's definition of religion (see Myth 1). It is worth noting, however, that some belief systems that are commonly thought of as religions do not involve gods, though they involve supernatural forces or principles, spiritual transformations, canons of conduct, and other features that typify religion. Thus Michael Martin argues that some religions could be atheistic. These include Jainism, Confucianism, and some forms of Buddhism (Martin, 2007, pp. 221–229). It would, however, be a logical error to deduce from this statement that atheism is a religion, and Martin emphasizes that it lacks all plausible religion-making characteristics (2007, pp. 220–221).

Let us have a closer look at Buddhism as a possible example of a godless religion. The original form of Buddhism makes no overt reference to gods. The historical character usually referred to as “Buddha” was a man of noble birth named Siddhartha Gautama, born in the foothills of the Himalayas around 566 BCE. According to traditional accounts, Siddhartha lived the first 29 years of his life in sheltered luxury in the family palace, where he was being groomed to inherit the royal duties from his father. Intellectually and spiritually dissatisfied, he stole out of the palace and renounced society, spending the next six years as a wandering ascetic. One night, he sat down under a fig tree and vowed that he would not get up until he had gained enlightenment. That night he did, indeed, attain enlightenment. The remainder of his life was devoted to helping others obtain it, and this is the basis of the Buddhist religion. Nothing in his teachings, as recorded and handed down to us, was theistic, and enlightenment as understood within these teachings does not involve knowledge of any god or gods.

If all this is granted, theism is not the essence of Buddhism, and there is no reason why a Buddhist could not be an atheist. However, this does not preclude the possibility that most Buddhists are actually theists. Indeed, as Martin discusses, some scholars do not accept that Buddhism was originally atheistic – there is an argument that it took over certain gods and a concept of the Absolute (which should, perhaps, be construed in theistic terms) from Hindu teachings (Martin, 2007, pp. 223–227).

Be that as it may, it appears that Buddhism, and some other religions such as Jainism and Confucianism, are at least open to atheistic interpretations. Accordingly, atheists could accept these religions as long as they believed its various nontheistic spiritual doctrines.

It is also possible to engage for various nonreligious reasons in *the practices* required of its adherents by a traditionally theistic religion. In pagan antiquity, the practice of religion as a form of civic duty was well understood. Thus the ruling classes of ancient Rome regarded the state religious rites as a means to earn divine favor for communal purposes, such as victory against enemy tribes, rather than to meet the citizens' "intimate spiritual needs." Even someone who did not believe in any of the traditional deities might have had reason to take part as a gesture of solidarity with fellow citizens, and the authorities did not object if individuals followed their own cultic practices in addition to the formal rites required by the state (Kirsch, 2004, pp. 93–94; Blackford, 2012, pp. 7, 21–23).

Even in modern circumstances, some atheists may have reasons to take part in the practices of a religion, though not believing in the existence of its god or gods, or accepting any teachings about the supernatural. For example, David Benatar argues that it is perfectly possible for an atheist to abide by religious scriptures' guidance without accepting the religion's god (Benatar 2006). Atheists abiding by scriptural rules will have their own motives and reasons for doing so. In days gone by, they might have done so for no other reason than to escape prosecution by religious authorities. In modern times it is more likely that someone would have cultural reasons for participating in the practices of a theistic religion. For example, some atheistic Jews or Muslims might wish to assert an identity, or solidarity, with other Jews or Muslims. More generally, someone might wish to participate in the religious culture that their friends and family members share.

Other reasons for taking part in religious practices might include the desire to impose a particular discipline on oneself, or the desire to bring up children in accordance with family traditions, or certain ideas of moral right and wrong. In her survey project on the religious views and practices of scientists in elite American universities, Elaine Howard Ecklund found a large percentage of atheists, and she certainly found that scientists tend to be less religious than the general public, but very few were "actively working against religion." Many nonbelievers – atheists and agnostics – were involved with houses of worship and were comfortable with religion, in some cases thinking of it as a moral training ground for their children (Ecklund, 2010, p. 150; see also for a first-hand account, Upshur, 2009).



## Myth 10 Atheists Worship False Gods (Satan, Money, Materialism, etc.)

We referred earlier (Myth 5) to a newspaper story by Miles Godfrey that deals with a number of attacks on atheism by church leaders in Australia. According to this report, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, harshly criticized nonbelievers, while the city's Anglican archbishop, Dr Peter Jensen, said in his Good Friday sermon that atheism was "a form of idolatry" (Godfrey, 2010). These attacks are part of a long tradition of associating atheism with venality, the pursuit of material goods, consumerism, the fickleness of mere fashion, and even the worship of Satan.

Let us turn first to the most extreme of these charges: that of Satan worship. In modern times, at least, it is surprisingly difficult to find serious thinkers who make such claims about atheists – and considerably easier to find atheists refuting them. We might draw the conclusion that the existence of this myth is itself a myth. But not so fast, please! It appears that many atheists are confronted by this accusation in their personal lives, and that the myth lives on among many ordinary religious people, even if it is not promulgated by theologians and intellectuals.

See, for example, an interview conducted by Kacey Cornell with Dallas-based atheist Sari Nelson, available online. Nelson complains that people she encounters in her daily life assume that as an atheist she must worship Satan, referring, in particular to an exchange about Satan with one of her co-workers who asked her rhetorically, "But aren't you an atheist?" (Cornell, 2009a). In a further post by Cornell, two days later (Cornell, 2009b), she describes an experience of her own in which a man with whom she was talking responded to her statement that she was an atheist by asking, "So does that mean you worship Satan?"

It is unclear just how common this perception might be in the twenty-first century, but anecdotal evidence suggests that many atheists encounter it. Let us put it to rest, then. Some atheists believe in supernatural forces of one kind or another, but by definition they do not believe in the existence of supernatural beings that could be regarded in any way as gods. Atheists do not believe in the existence of Satan, let alone regard him as a god and worship him (Rowe, 1979). The idea is even less plausible once we think for a moment of Satan's role as God's competitor within certain strains of Christian theism in particular. The idea of believing in and worshipping a literal Satan makes no real sense outside of such a context (compare Cline, n.d.).

Satan worship aside, the themes of idolatry, materialism, and so on, were much to the fore in the contributions by speakers for the affirmative in a 2011 public debate on the topic “Atheists Are Wrong” – again held in Sydney. The written versions of the speeches by Archbishop Jensen, academic theologian Tracey Rowland, and theologian cum journalist Scott Stephens all maintain aspects of this association.

Jensen sees atheists as engaging in idolatry when they understand material processes, such as evolution, as sufficient explanations of the world’s varied phenomena (Jensen, 2011). Rowland and Stephens show even more hostility toward atheism, closely associating it with all the evils that they detect in contemporary Western society. Rowland blames atheism for “hollowing out” many aspects of human life to what she calls their “materialist shell,” thereby producing such things as brutally manipulative sex, consumerism, status anxiety, and the cult of celebrity (Rowland, 2011).

Likewise, Stephens is scathing. “There are,” he says, “few things today more fashionable, more suited to our modern conceit, than atheism.” He adds that atheism fits what he calls “our modern predicament” of shallowness, nihilism, and self-indulgence, though at least he doesn’t regard atheism as the *cause* of this predicament:

In a way, I think where atheism fits in our cultural moment it is more incidental than that. Our real problem today is the impoverishment of the modern mind, our inability to think properly about such elevated things as the Good, Beauty, Truth, Law, Love, Life, Death, Humanity, the End or Purpose of things, even Sex itself, without such ideas being debased by an incurious and all-pervasive nihilism. (Stephens, 2011)

What should we make of all this? In fact, atheism does not require the worship of anything. As James Rachels argues (1971), worshiping involves a distinct set of actions with a uniquely theistic character. Rachels distinguishes the positive attitude of awe from worship. Awe need not involve the kinds of beliefs involved in worship: for instance, we might be in awe of the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef without worshiping it. Nor need awe involve any activities – but worship certainly does. According to Rachels, worship involves the aim of submitting oneself to a superior power (hence, not all ceremonies involve worship). The activity of worship is meant to express the way in which a particular belief – namely that one occupies a submissive relation to God – “dominates one’s whole way of life” (Rachels, 1971, p. 331).

It is difficult to see how such things as money, materialism, consumerism, and evolution could meet the conditions needed to be objects of worship.

It's very doubtful that anyone *worships* these things, in the full sense of the word. Perhaps, however, such claims can be interpreted less literally. Do atheists put money, material goods, or other "false gods" at the center of their lives? This might, we suppose, be a metaphorical kind of "worship." Furthermore, are atheists somehow to blame for, or complicit in, such aspects of modern culture as its emphasis on fashion, celebrity, and material wealth?

Well, where is the evidence? Quite possibly some atheists are capitalists aiming to increase their wealth. They would not be alone in such a venture. The main contenders for the position of Republican candidate for President of the USA in the 2012 presidential elections, Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich, made a point of stressing prominently that they did not see a conflict between worshipping their respective gods and maximizing their own income. The Republican primaries ultimately singled out Romney as the party's candidate – thus choosing a man with enormous personal wealth and annual income. He, in turn, chose Paul Ryan as his running mate and candidate for the Vice Presidency of the USA. Ryan is a conservative Christian who shares atheist Ayn Rand's views when it comes to economic matters.

In any event, you will find many atheists who describe themselves as socialists, or, more likely unorthodox left-of-centre. Their primary concern may be societal well-being rather than individual enrichment. It is true, of course, that contemporary societies place great value on wealth and celebrity, but atheists can hardly be blamed for that – indeed, much of this stems from the culture of the United States, which remains the most religious society in the Western world, with far more theists than atheists among its population.

Furthermore, there is a long history of reverence, if not exactly worship, for the supposed majesty of aristocrats and wealthy people. This certainly predates the critiques of religion set forth by modern atheists (critiques that were unknown before the seventeenth century). It is doubtful that many people's tendencies to be impressed by worldly wealth, status, and power have anything to do with atheism, or that atheists are more culpable in this regard than anyone else. Indeed, churches and their leaders – from medieval popes and bishops to modern-day televangelists – have frequently shown a love of material pomp and possessions exceeding that of any well-known atheist (see Golgowski, 2012). If this is a kind of "idolatry," then so be it, but atheists are hardly to blame.