

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering a natural way of looking at the world
- » Watching the progression of a startling idea through the ages
- » Tracing atheism through works of writing
- » Living as an everyday atheist

Chapter **1**

Meeting Atheism

The idea that no god or gods exist is a startling one. Most people grow up hearing that the existence of a supernatural being is a settled question and that nothing else can explain this complex, astonishing world.

But through the centuries, some people have always doubted the God conclusion — and some have even come to the firm conviction that humans created God, not the other way around.

Of course, saying such a thing out loud tends to cause a lot of sputtering and fainting from people who disagree, not to mention the occasional smell of something burning. That's why most of those who didn't believe in the religions and gods of their times kept quiet about it.

But other nonbelievers spoke up anyway, thank God, and they keep doing so today; otherwise this book wouldn't exist, and you'd be looking at your palms. People would talk. But the book does exist, and this chapter gives you a flying overview of what to expect as you leaf through it.

Getting a Grip on Atheism

Atheism is a big umbrella. It covers anyone who thinks that this natural world is all there is — no gods, no angels, no spirits, or afterlife. But under that umbrella are many shades and grades of disbelief and many people with different ways of approaching and expressing it.

Atheists become atheists for many different reasons, and they rarely have anything to do with unanswered prayers or major life calamities. In fact, major trauma drives people *into* belief at least as often as it drives them out of it.

Seeing the many forms and faces of religious disbelief

You can find about as many ways to disbelieve as you can ways to believe — different degrees, different emphases, and different expressions.

Here are some examples:

- » *Antitheists* are atheists who actively oppose religion and want a world without it.
- » *Accommodationists* are atheists who emphasize the common ground between the religious and nonreligious rather than the differences.
- » *Agnostics* emphasize their uncertainty about God's existence and often claim that nobody can know the answer.
- » *Apatheists* don't know whether God exists and (this is important) *don't care*.
- » *Secular humanists* are nonbelievers who focus on how to live a good human life in a natural universe.
- » *Religious atheists* include many Buddhists, Hindus, Unitarians, and Jains who keep their religious identities and philosophies without bothering any gods.
- » *Freethinkers* form their opinions about the universe without the undue influence of religious authority.
- » *Unaffiliateds* or "*Nones*" aren't religious but generally aren't interested in any label at all, thank you very much.

Even some religious opinions (like Deism and pantheism) exist that are so far removed from any traditional conception of God that many people include them under the atheist umbrella. And a single nonbeliever can, and often does, claim several of these labels at once, or change labels several times throughout a

thoughtful lifetime. *Remember:* These designations emphasize different things, but most aren't mutually exclusive. Check out Chapter 2 to further complicate your idea of what an atheist can be.

Examining what nonbelievers believe and don't believe — and why

I learned about history from historians and history teachers. I learned about religion by listening to believers and reading their scriptures directly. But most of what people think they know about atheism they learned from people who aren't atheists and don't especially like or even *understand* atheists.

That's a recipe for misinformation if ever I heard one.

I went to church for 25 years for various reasons, including family and job, and was every bit as much an atheist as I am now. Doing so was a big part of my own religious education. But over and over, I heard myself described from the pulpit in ways that made me sad and upset. Being an atheist, I was apparently a very nasty and selfish guy, not all that smart, and bad to the core. I heard that I didn't care about others and couldn't be trusted, and that I'd come to my beliefs by hardening my heart, by serving false gods, by not wanting to acknowledge God's power over me.

I've since met enough churchgoing atheists to know that I was never the only nonbeliever in the crowd.

One Sunday I sat with my (awesome) Christian wife for a sermon in which Christians who were married to nonbelievers were urged to leave their spouses (2 Corinthians 6:14: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?").

That's when I stopped going entirely.

If you want to find out more about a religious perspective, I'm a poor choice for a guide. But if you want to know what atheism is actually about, I suggest asking an atheist. I happen to be available, so read on!

In Chapter 3, I spend some time describing what atheists actually believe and debunking some common myths about us. Most atheists take ethics very seriously, for example, and find life deeply meaningful and inspiring. We're not mad at God — at least no madder than the Pope is at Chac, the Mayan rain god — and though some atheists may lose their belief in God after something bad happens to them, that's not the most common path.



REMEMBER

Most atheists come to their conclusions after really working on it for a while and then becoming convinced by things like those I outline in Chapter 3.

Seeing the Progression of Atheism

A lot of people think that atheism is a recent idea. But religious disbelief has a documented history *older than Christianity and Islam*. Imagine that. The chapters in Part 2 take you on a quick ride through that history. Just as a student of Christianity should learn about some significant things that happened 20 centuries ago, someone who wants a better understanding of atheism needs to know what atheism has been up to for the past 30 centuries.

In the distant past and different cultures

People tend to think of certain times and places as completely uniform in religious terms. India is full to the brim with Hindus. The Greeks all worshipped the gods of Olympus. Everyone in medieval Europe was Christian. Right?

A closer look shows all these claims to be misleading. Just as political “red states” (Republicans) and “blue states” (Democrats) in the United States are really all various shades of purple, every place and time in human history includes a lot of different beliefs — including atheism.



REMEMBER

Not all points of view have the same chance to speak into the cultural microphone in a given place and time. The main religion tends to call the shots and write the histories, especially before the 18th century. Add the fact that atheism has often been punishable by imprisonment or death, and you can see why atheists in certain times and places tend to *whisper*.

Ancient and medieval eras

Atheism in the ancient and medieval world is a story that very few people — even most *atheists* — know. But the voices are there, including some in the distant past and in cultures both in and out of Europe. In Part 2 of this book, you meet

- » Atheists in ancient China, where atheism was a welcome part of the conversation among philosophers
- » Atheists in ancient and medieval India, including religions with completely godless branches
- » Atheists in ancient Greece, where they were welcome at first and then absolutely not

- » Religious skeptics in early Islam who called Muhammad a liar
- » An atheist hero in 13th-century Icelandic legend
- » Three 14th-century French villagers whose disbelief was ferreted out by a shocked bishop during the Inquisition

The Enlightenment

By the early 18th century, disbelief was gathering serious steam in Europe. Secret documents challenging religious belief had been circulating for 50 years, just steps ahead of the censors. In 1729, French parishioners going through the papers of their recently deceased Catholic priest found copies of a book he'd written for them telling how much he detested and disbelieved the religion he'd taught them for 40 years.

By the end of the century, philosophers in France, Germany, and England were challenging religious power and ideas and establishing modern concepts of human rights and individual liberty. It all culminated, for better and worse, in the French Revolution, when a brief flirtation with an atheist state was followed by the Cult of the Supreme Being and the Reign of Terror — at which point atheism understandably hit the snooze button for a bit. (Flip to Chapter 6 for details on this era.)

In the 19th century

The idea that God doesn't really exist never completely went away, even when someone like Napoleon shut it down for a while. It was always bubbling under the surface and occasionally shooting out sideways through someone who just couldn't stand to keep it quiet.

The poet Percy Shelley proved to be one such person, getting himself kicked out of Oxford in 1811 for expressing an atheist opinion. Then the early feminists of England and the United States made clear that they considered religion to be a stumbling block in the way of women's rights.

Science really put the wind in the sails of atheism in the 19th century. By paying close attention to the natural world, Darwin turned himself from a minister in training to an agnostic and solved the complexity problem that prevented so many people from letting go of God. As the biologist Richard Dawkins once said, atheism may have been possible before Darwin, but Darwin made being an “intellectually fulfilled atheist” possible. But a flurry of activity after Darwin's death tried to hide his loss of faith, including some selective editing of his autobiography and a false deathbed conversion story dreamed up by a British evangelist.

In Darwin's wake, a golden age of freethought opened up in the United States and the United Kingdom. I lay it all out for your enjoyment in Chapter 7.

In the 20th century

Atheism doesn't guarantee good behavior any more than religion does, and "absolute power corrupts absolutely" became a tragically apt phrase in the 20th century. Examples of corruption and immorality abound in positions of unchecked power, both by atheists (like Mao in China, Stalin in the USSR, and Pol Pot in Cambodia) and theists (like Hitler in Germany, Franco in Spain, and Idi Amin in Uganda).

The good news included the growth of humanism as a movement and court victories for the separation of church and state — something that benefits both the church and the state.

The 20th century also saw one of the most fascinating developments in the history of religion as two God-optional religions formed: Unitarian Universalism and Humanistic Judaism. Chapter 8 gives you more on that topic.

In the new millennium

A movement that some called "New Atheism" was born the moment religious beliefs allowed adherents to fly planes into buildings on September 11, 2001. Though atheists had been around for thousands of years, the horror and clarity of that moment, and the very clear part religion played, were the last straw and a call to action for many nonreligious people. A powerful, unapologetic new form of atheism grew up in response, calling for an end to the free pass from criticism that religion had traditionally enjoyed.

An upsurge in atheist thought, identity, organization, and action followed the initial wave. Driven by the young medium of the Internet, the freethought movement did in ten years what many other social movements take generations to achieve.

Later still came a quieter, more humanistic form of disbelief, one that

- »» Makes an effort to discern between benign and malignant expressions of religion
- »» Seeks common ground between the religious and the nonreligious
- »» Focuses on building human community and defining a positive vision for the future

These two sides of contemporary atheism spend a lot of time kvetching at each other over the best way forward. Though it does break a little China, kvetching can be a good way of sorting good ideas from bad.

As I write this in the 2020s, being nonreligious has become so mainstream that many people without a shred of religion are so relaxed about their beliefs that they don't even bother naming it.

Chapter 9 brings you a hopelessly incomplete but hopefully tantalizing snapshot of the big, messy, complicated wonder of atheism today.

Examining Atheism in the Written Word

The history of atheism is the history of an idea. To understand that history, you have to look primarily at the written word — books, letters, diaries, pamphlets, and, more recently, blogs. Part 3 takes a survey of the great works expressing and exploring the idea that gods don't exist, including

- » A telling two-sentence fragment from an ancient Greek play
- » An ancient Indian *sutra* that suggests religion is a human invention and the authors of the sacred Vedas are “buffoons” and “knaves”
- » An ancient Chinese philosopher who explains why “heaven” can't have a mind
- » An Islamic doubter who calls Muhammad “fraudulent” and dismantles the idea of prophecy
- » A secret, anonymous 17th-century book of skeptical writings from the past that suggests that every great philosopher has been an atheist
- » A Catholic priest writing a secret book filled with his atheist opinions
- » One of the most beloved authors in American history calling Christianity “bad, bloody, merciless, money-grabbing, and predatory”
- » Hilarious satires and other humor that skewer the sacred
- » The fake scripture of a delicious parody religion
- » Powerful denunciations of religious belief in the 21st century
- » A humanist chaplain's description of how a billion people are good without God
- » An atheist exploring rituals that create meaning without religion

With all those diverse voices of unbelief, you just may see something worth picking up yourself.

Understanding What Atheism Means in Everyday Life

After someone becomes an atheist, their question about whether God exists is replaced by questions about the best ways to live life without God following them around, solving their problems, nagging them, and giving them a place to put their feet up after they're dead.

In other words: How do I live as an everyday atheist?

The chapters in Part 4 are all about regular folks who don't believe in God, including

- » How many exist and where they live
- » Why simple things like the numbers and locations of atheists are really tricky to figure out
- » The most interesting corners of the disbelieving world (*cough* Québec)
- » How atheism plays out in political identity
- » Why young adults of today are so secular
- » Why (some) atheists are (sometimes) so angry
- » What September 11, 2001, did to modern atheism
- » How the generations that followed have relaxed into their atheism

That's all in Chapter 16, one of my favorites.

Chapter 17 tackles the silly question of whether a person can be good without belief in God. Spoiler: The answer is yes. That should be a relief to everyone because nonbelief is growing rapidly, possibly even coming to a next-door neighbor near you. This chapter also describes how morality actually works and helps everyone relax about it.

Chapter 18 is all about how the world looks with no gods blocking the view. Conventional wisdom has it that the loss of faith is followed by a plunge into an abyss of despair, after which the newly minted atheist climbs out of the abyss and starts stepping on puppies.

I can report that “freedom and relief” is a much more common description of the post-religious life than “despair and puppy smooching.” A feeling of overwhelming responsibility and accountability is also common after you realize that it really, truly is just humanity here, and that people could all use a hug once in a while. Or a nice, smoky, single-malt scotch.

One of the most pressing questions for the nonreligious is how to interact with and respond to the religious world around them. Chapter 19 explores the many issues around that, including church-state issues, “coming out,” and learning about religion.

Chapter 20 looks at the many ways nonreligious people are finding to achieve the benefits that religious communities enjoy without the supernatural beliefs. It starts by understanding the real reasons people go to church — not my opinions, you understand, but actual research on the topic — and then follows up with

- » Creating community
- » Celebrating life’s landmarks
- » Counseling and support without religion
- » Doing good together

Chapter 21 is all about untangling humanity’s strange and uncertain future, including AI, digital immortality, and a chaotic climate, without the admittedly handy benefit of an all-powerful Friend who knows how the story ends.

GETTING PERSONAL: WHY I’M AN ATHEIST

Atheists come to their conclusions for a lot of different reasons. Here’s a brief look at mine.

My own path to atheism was smoother than some. I didn’t have a painful break with religion, and I was certainly never “mad at God.” I figured if he did exist, he was probably exasperated at the way most religions described him — petty, egotistical, and more than a little inconsistent. And if he was real, I thought he was likely to be a better sport than to burn me for guessing wrong about him. I wondered from a very early age whether he actually existed or humans had made him up.

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Our family went to church, but I was never pushed to declare any particular beliefs. I also had a ravenous curiosity about the world. Everything about it fascinated and amazed me. My parents encouraged my curiosity as much as they could and gave me space to think and explore. One of the things I explored was whether any god or gods exist. How could I not? It's the most interesting question in the world! If a supernatural being created and controls everything, that's astonishing. If the universe developed and runs without such a being, *that's* astonishing. I just wanted to know what was actually true. In short, I treated the question of God as a real question.

I explored the question in every way I could think of. I went to church for 25 years, asked believers why they believe this and not that, and read scriptures from every religion I could lay my hands on. And I thought about it — a lot.

I also studied the sciences a lot. Eventually I came to see them both as expressions of the human mind's thirst to know. For most of human history, leaving a lot of question marks in the human brain about how the world worked wouldn't have felt safe. People needed to fill those blanks in with something so they could cultivate the illusion that they were in control of things — or at least that someone powerful and good was in control. Science is asking many of the same questions, but by controlling human biases, it has a much better chance of getting the right answers.

I've left out most of the details, of course; Chapter 3 fills in the rest. But that's my basic story. I'm an atheist because I felt the question of God was wonderful enough to deserve an honest answer.