
Atheists

Origins

In the mid-seventeenth century an anonymous document entitled *Theophrastus redivivus* was published, it is thought in France, and this is reckoned to be one of the oldest atheistic manuscripts in existence. This was followed a few years later by another anonymous atheistic document entitled *Symbolum sapientiae*. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the need for anonymity became less pressing. Pierre Bayle, although not an atheist himself, wrote of the possibility of a *virtuous society of atheists*. Matthias Knutzen was an example of a seventeenth-century atheist who was prepared openly to assert his views. In 1747 the atheist La Mettrie published *L'Homme machine*, and in 1770 Baron d'Holbach published *Systeme de la nature*, a seminal work on philosophical atheism.

The secularising effects of the French Revolution provided a key impetus in the development of modern atheism, giving rise to the Cult of Reason. In response, Robespierre instituted the Cult of the Supreme Being, which, however, extolled nature and the universe. The French Revolution gave rise to a more confident espousal of atheism.

In Germany, atheistic philosophers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche were gaining prominence. Marxism led to Communism, which, in the case of countries such as the Soviet Union, led to State Atheism. In an article in 1966, entitled "Towards a hidden God", *Time* magazine identified Nietzsche as the prophet for those who claimed that unbelief in God is a necessary prerequisite to wisdom. This issue of *Time* had the notorious cover posing the question, "Is God Dead?"

Today

The Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins, with his 2006 book *The God Delusion*, has been in the forefront of atheism. The so-called 'bus-ad' campaign in Britain, with the slogan, *There's probably no God*, has exemplified the increasingly proactive campaigns by atheists. Since then, atheists in several European countries and in North America have carried out similar bus campaigns. Whilst atheism is seen as essentially negative, atheists are often also humanists, advocating a positive attitude towards the world.

What the mainstream says

- Negative atheism is the lack of theistic belief.
- Positive atheism is the asserted disbelief in God or gods.
- Agnostic atheism is the lack of either belief or disbelief in God or gods.
- The existence of nature does not provide evidence for a God (a rejection of deism).
- No god intervenes in the world (a rejection of deism).
- There are not many gods (rejection of polytheism).
- God is not identical with nature (rejection of pantheism).
- There are no supernatural spirits or beings.
- There are no supernatural interventions in the world.

(Source: <http://www.investigatingatheism.info/definition.html>)

Suggested initial Scriptural approach

The statement by Paul, "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20), is a good starting point because the wonder of creation *is* the evidence that God exists. Another point worth making is that Scripture speaks with *authority* (Mk. 1:22). This authority gives confidence in believing in, for example, miracles.