**Definition:** **Atheism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Philosophical denial of the existence of God or any supernatural or spiritual being. Early Christians were called atheists because they denied Roman religions, but the term now usually indicates the denial of Christian theism. During the 18th-century Enlightenment, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and the Encyclopedists laid the foundations for atheism. In the 19th century, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud all accommodated some form of atheism into their respective philosophies. Today many individuals and groups advocate atheism. See also agnosticism.

**Summary Article:** **Atheism**

From *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*

The lack of belief in God generally known as **atheism** is a much-maligned viewpoint both historically and in recent times. General suspicion then follows concerning its ability to address questions concerning diversity and social justice. Recent sociological data challenges this long-standing view by establishing close links between secularism and social well-being. The recent popularity of the "New Atheism" has also served to sharpen our understanding of atheism, secularism, and their possible connections to questions of social justice. Some commentators see the need for a synthesis of atheism with the socially progressive agenda often assigned to secular humanism. When combined with a fuller recognition of the empirical data that connects atheism with social wellness, the promotion of such a synthesis may help to gradually remove the negative social stigma commonly associated with atheism.

**Definitions, Issues, and Data**

In the strictest sense, an atheist is someone who does not believe in God, while an agnostic is someone who remains unsure concerning God's existence. Other terms such as freethinker, humanist, and skeptic are also sometimes associated with atheism and agnosticism. Secular individuals are nonreligious or generally uninterested in religious beliefs, rituals, and activities (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 950; Kettell, 2013, p. 62). Such sharp distinctions mask a more complicated reality. Someone might be secular but not an atheist, since although never attending religious events or participating in its rituals, they still believe in something they call God. One might be an atheist and yet still be religious; such a person has no belief in God but still finds value in the social and psychological functions of religious commitment. Here we have an example in which the religious might be replaced with what is called "the spiritual" (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 950). Differences in atheist attitudes can even vary across cultures, as has been documented in a recent comparative study of atheism in the United States and Scandinavia (Zuckerman, 2012). If we adhere to a strict definition of atheism as simply nonbelief in God, then this position does not directly imply any specific viewpoint on issues of social justice. However, as we are about to see, when discussions of atheism turn to real-life examples and sociological data, it becomes unavoidably caught up with such issues.

Focusing on the question of social justice and its possible connection to atheism reveals three significant points. The first highlights how atheists themselves have a long history of experiencing discrimination and forms of social injustice. To cite a few examples: The Bible portrays nonbelievers as corrupt individuals incapable of performing good deeds (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 949). Even the British philosopher John Locke, in his compelling and moving defense of religious toleration, remained unwilling...
to extend such toleration to atheists (1983). This negative view persists today, with many Americans finding atheists to be the most problematic minority group. Here, public opinion can have real-life consequences. For example, divorced parents have had custody rights denied or limited because of their professed atheism (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 949). A second point often cited as the source of this general distrust of atheism is the view that nonbelievers are simply incapable of effectively addressing issues involving political, ethical, and social justice. The faithless or godless are here depicted as morally bankrupt and without redemption. They cannot then be trusted in providing any sort of moral foundation for issues of broader social and moral concern. This negative formulation of the issue is often made by theists, but as a basic question concerning the ethical and political credentials of atheism has recently appeared as a controversial issue debated within the atheism camp itself. Here we see a final point in which the recent rise of militant forms of atheists, usually described as the New Atheism, have resulted in an internal debate among atheists concerning whether their position does or does not entail a commitment to actively pursuing socially progressive views.

The most recent sociological evidence currently available largely dispels this negative stance toward atheism. There exists a large body of evidence that supports the view that a nonreligious lifestyle is not only a respectable one that does not undermine social justice but actually tends to support and promote progressive views on diversity and social justice. Not believing in God does not imply that one does not maintain strong beliefs on a number of different issues, including political and moral ones. Nonbelievers generally have a strong commitment to certain kinds of values. For example, numerous studies show that when compared with the values and beliefs of religious people, secular individuals tend to be less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less racist, less close-minded, and less authoritarian (Zuckerman, 2009, p. 953). More specifically, within the political realm, atheism is correlated with liberal, progressive views, and atheists themselves are found to be more politically tolerant than their religious peers, supporting the extension of civil liberties to minority groups. Atheists also tend to be supportive of gender equality and women's rights and are accepting of homosexuality and gay rights. Other studies find that atheists tend to adopt a more progressive viewpoint on a number of contemporary social issues. Atheists are less supportive of the death penalty than religious people and are the group least supportive of the government's use of torture. They are more likely to support doctor-assisted suicide, stem cell research, and the legalization of marijuana than their religious peers (Zuckerman, 2009, pp. 953–54). Atheists then exhibit a commitment to a set of beliefs and values on a number of moral, political, and social issues. The American sociologist Phil Zuckerman has even argued that this evidence supports the claim that atheists possess a more ethical sense of social justice than their religious counterparts.

The Rise of the “New Atheism”

Much of the recent discussion of the merits (or lack thereof) of a nonreligious, secularist view has been influenced by the rise of the New Atheism given expression in the widely read books of Dawkins, Hitchens, and others (2006; 2007; Kettell, 2013, p. 62). The general viewpoint of the New Atheism may be characterized in the following terms. It begins with a basic commitment to a naturalist worldview that cites the centrality of reason and science as the best means for understanding reality. Religion is further viewed as consisting of a set of beliefs about reality that should be treated like any other scientific hypothesis and measured against the best available evidence. The New Atheists conclude that, in the case of religion, no such evidence is available that lives up to such scientific standards, and so religious belief itself must be rejected. They further highlight the subjective and
their view, religious belief leads to an exclusionary and divisive type of mentality that fosters prejudice, discrimination, and violence. So construed, the New Atheism adopts an explicit critical perspective toward religion that attempts to prevent the increasing religious encroachment within public life by exposing the irrational and dangerous consequences of religious belief (Kettell, 2013, p. 62). The newness of the New Atheism stems less from its arguments that mostly repeat well-known points made against religious doctrines. Rather, its novelty is best located in its rather extreme, open, and public militancy against religion and its surprising public popularity and influence (Kettell, 2013, p. 64).

The aims of the New Atheism are not confined to the intellectual critique of religion found in its popular books, but also include a broader and significant political activism. This can be seen with some of the factors that help explain the rise of this new “movement.” Importantly, the authority and prestige given to modern science has served to support and augment the perspective of the New Atheists and is used as a central platform from which they criticize religion. Two other more explicit political factors that help to explain the motives of the New Atheists involve the growing influence of religion in political matters and the importance of “identity politics” for the movement itself (Kettell, 2013, p. 63). Since the start of the current century, both the United Kingdom and the United States have seen a significant rise in the influence of religion in the public, political arena. The New Atheism has responded to this influence in a number of ways. Thought of as a larger movement that is best characterized as loosely organized, having little hierarchical structure, and no formal organization, its members nevertheless work within a set of existing secularist groups actively promoting atheism views and ideals. In America, this includes their participation in such groups as American Atheists, the Center for Inquiry, and the American Humanist Association among others (Kettell, 2013, p. 64).

They are also engaged in political activities found outside the formal public arena. Here they challenge religion in the private sphere and consider issues focusing on civil rights and group belonging. These issues involve the use of “identity politics” to widen the scope of the political where this is most prominent in the United States (Kettell, 2013, p. 65). Identity politics places special emphasis on groups as they promote shared interests that are based on a common set of concerns and issues. The success of identity politics relies on maintaining a strong sense of collective commitment, clear identity criteria, and a sense of group oppression, all of which are needed to help sustain group motivation. So construed, identity politics helps the New Atheists in their attempt to discredit religious belief by raising public awareness about atheism in order to counter its negative social stigma. This is furthered by, among other things, adopting a language of group rights and social justice and by attempting to establish a support network for atheists (Kettell, 2013, pp. 65–66).

While achieving some positive results, the use of identity politics has also fostered some conflicts within the atheist movement. The central problem here centers on questions of diversity, where general agreement that attempts be made to address the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities within secularism has been coupled with a somewhat divisive debate concerning gender equality (Kettell, 2013, p. 67). These discussions have even resulted in the attempt to forge a new identity for atheism known as “Atheism+.” Introduced by Jen McCreight in a number of blog posts, Atheism+ has gained some popular traction with its proposal for a new “new atheism,” claiming that the problems facing the atheist movement are the result of its overwhelming control by old, white, middle-class men. She presents Atheism+ as a call for more action where an atheist viewpoint is specifically connected to progressive political aims. This is further depicted as resulting in the need for a synthesis between
atheism, secularism, and humanism in order to address questions of social justice, diversity, and provide a more uplifting, positive ethical vision for humanity (Kettell, 2013, p. 67). Reactions to Atheism+ have been mixed. While some see this suggestion as a positive step forward for the atheism movement, others view it as a potentially elitist and divisive viewpoint. They further note that a secular handling of social justice concerns is already conducted under the banner of secular humanism (Kettell, 2013, pp. 67–68).

Remaining Challenges
This recent upsurge of interest in atheism can then be understood as following from the general political motives of the New Atheism. While this trend began with an outspoken defense of the rational integrity and respectability of the atheist position, it has further focused on external political issues designed to curb the influence of religion in public life and internal issues concerned with establishing a community of purpose within the atheist movement. Recent data showing a decrease in religious commitment, coupled with a modest rise in those who openly declare their atheist commitment, suggest that the movement has been partially successful (Kettell, 2013, p. 68). However, the outspoken, militant nature of this call to action has served to partially reinforce skepticism concerning its ability to address social issues concerning justice. We saw that the lack of diversity within its existing ranks has led to a call for a renewed atheism that more explicitly addresses progressive issues of diversity and social justice. Moreover, aside from religious believers who find the New Atheist’s arguments lacking, others more sympathetic to secular humanism place special emphasis on the shortcomings of the New Atheist’s criticism of religious commitment. The philosopher Philip Kitcher (2011) argues that because of an exclusive focus on religious belief, militant forms of atheism remain unable to recognize the types of religious commitment that stem from a primacy of orientation rather than of belief. Focusing exclusively on belief seduces us into thinking that simply correcting false religious beliefs will automatically lead to a better view of what is significant and worth pursuing in human life (Kitcher, 2011, p. 10). It is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which the psychological and social conditions that support life, in terms of providing individuals with worthwhile goals to achieve, can only be sustained through their communal participation in religious practices and institutions. While arguably cogent in its attack on religious belief, the New Atheism fails to fully address the central psychological and social functions of religious commitment that are not specifically tied to the belief in religious doctrine or orthodoxy.

There then remains a general question concerning whether atheism can be seen as committed to addressing progressive social issues. In order to do so, the main suggestion has been that atheism be explicitly tied to a commitment to secular humanism. Carrying out this synthesis requires effectively addressing two main challenges. The first attempts to further demonstrate how an atheist position can be informed by a concern with issues of social justice. That is, noting that while an atheist position in the strictest sense does not imply any view on the question of social justice, neither should it be viewed as precluding any such commitment. In fact, as we have seen, while not explaining why secularism or atheism often involves a commitment to socially and politically progressive ideals, existing sociological data suggests a strong correlation between atheism and a commitment to such ideals. We have seen the introduction of Atheism+ as a recent attempt to meet this issue. The second challenge tries to show how atheism or secularism can both be recognized and offers ways for addressing the social and psychological functions found in religious commitment. In meeting this difficult challenge of locating shared values and ideals between secularism and those committed to religion, it has been

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/atheism
suggested that we separate the religious from the supernatural (Dewey, 1934; Dworkin, 2013). Here we may find a shared interest in community and other values that are common to atheists, secularists, and those who in various ways are committed to religion. Further attempts to address these challenges when coupled with a deeper appreciation for the data that supports the social well-being that accompanies nonreligious attitudes could lead to a greater respect and cultural acceptance for atheism and secularism more generally.

References


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