

So you think you're an atheist?

Atheism and **agnosticism** are growing in popularity as people question traditional and superstitious beliefs.

When people see hypocrisy or intolerance in society, they begin to question the beliefs which lead to this, and to look for alternatives.

This naturally leads them to consider atheism.

Others come to atheism because of their passion for science and rationalism and they worry about the influence of religion on politics and society.

But what does it mean to be an atheist?

This short guide will try to explain.

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What is Religion?

Religion is a **system of belief** with a deity or spiritual figure in a position of authority.

Religion differs from personal beliefs or **faith** in that adherents of a religion subscribe to a common set of beliefs or practices to form a society. The earliest religions probably evolved from the need to bind social groups of primates together as they moved from loose groups to established communities.

Many early religions were **polytheistic**, having many gods as in Greek mythology. Most of the modern major religions are **monotheistic** (with a single god figure).

This list shows the numbers of adherents in the major world religions :

Bhuddism (376m)
Chinese Traditional (394m) inc Confucianism and Taoism
Christianity (2100m)
Hinduism (900m)
Islam (1300m)
Judaism (14m)
Primal indigenous (300m)
Shinto (4m)
Sikhism (23m)
Zoroastrianism (2.6m)

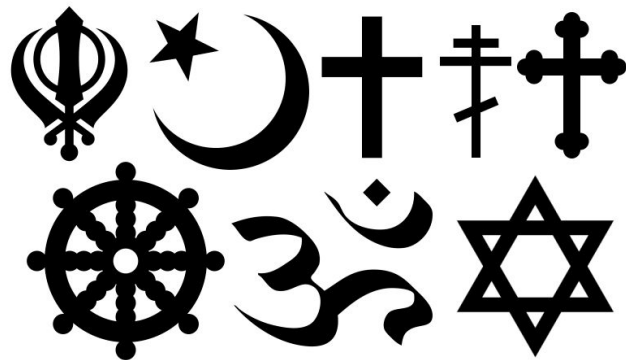


Illustration 1: Religious Symbols : major world religions

Many religions have **scripture** or text that they consider special and regard as either divinely inspired (though written by humans) or as the direct revelation of a deity.

The Abrahamic religions from around the Mediterranean have a trilogy of texts which overlap and contradict each other : the earliest is the *Tanakh* or Hebrew Bible of Judaism, then the *Old Testament* and *New Testament* of Christianity and the later *Quran* of Islam.

In addition to a central text there is often subsequent text which interprets the concepts of the original text into a later context (such as the *haditha* of Islam or *talmud* of Judiasm). There are also usually other conflicting and historical versions of texts which are not considered authentic and not counted as part of the **canon** or authorised texts.

Nearly all religions view their texts as perfect and without error and challenging the contents invites penalties from censure to excommunication, or in extreme cases death.

At their heart religions often have a system of **morality** – a code of how to behave, a guide to what is 'good' or 'bad' and how believers should live their lives.

For example several religions, including Judaism and Islam, forbid the eating of pork. Other common rules include prohibitions against homosexuality, consumption of alcohol or rules constraining the role of women in society.



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Philosophy, Reason and Science

Philosophy is the study of reality, existence and knowledge.

Epistemology is the study of the nature and scope of knowledge and of the relationship between beliefs, truth and knowledge.

In part, it attempts to answer the question *how do we know what we know?*

What we believe is different from what is true and what we believe and is true is different from what we can know to be true (philosophers call this justified belief – it separates what we believe and is accidentally true from what we know to be true).

There are different positions on knowledge : a skeptic questions everything, an empiricist trusts his senses but a **rationalist** regards reason as the only test for knowledge.

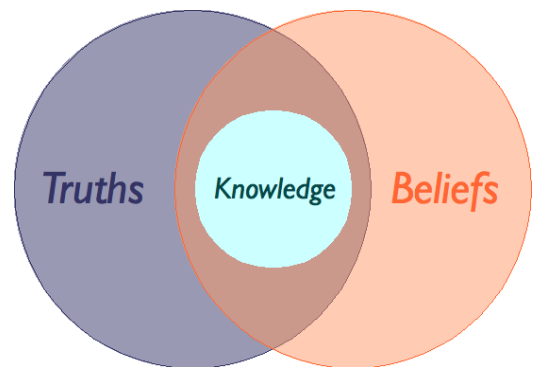


Illustration 2: Truth, knowledge and beliefs



Illustration 3: Rene Descartes

Modern rationalism started with René Descartes in 1637 and his famous assertion “*cogito ergo sum*” – I think therefore I am or I am that which thinks. Descartes was asserting that there is a foundational truth underlying rational thought and from that you can build knowledge through reason.

Karl Popper extended this into a philosophy of **science** called critical rationalism. No amount of experimentation or observation can absolutely prove a theory, but a single failure can disprove it; known as falsifiability.

This is why scientists often talk about observations which 'support' a theory rather than prove it. However, as Popper argued, if all your observations support a theory, there is no need to replace it until you have contradictory **evidence**.

Modern methods of science have led to the incredibly rapid advancement of knowledge, technology and human society in the past 400 years.

Religious adherents often assert that science only applies to the physical world, how things happen, and has no answers for why things happen; which is the domain of religion and spirituality. This would be true only in a system where God does not interact at all with the physical world, a position best espoused by the 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza who described God as an impersonal force without intelligence, feeling or will.



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Logic is another sub-branch of philosophy that deals with the correct way to reason or to evaluate the validity of different arguments. It developed as a formal study because philosophers needed a way to evaluate different propositions in order to increase their **knowledge**, by retaining what is true and valid, and discarding that which is not.

Modern philosophers have generally moved away from natural languages into maths-like symbolism that eliminate the fuzziness of human language, but there is still a lot to be learned by studying the original logic devised by Aristotle around 350 BCE.

At its heart, logic defines the correct form of an argument.

If an argument aims to increase knowledge, the parties involved must be prepared to concede when the other makes a valid point. If not, there is no point to the discussion. Logic defines the standard rules under which this is possible.

Typically an argument is made from **deductions**; in which some assumptions or premises are asserted, followed by a conclusion. If you accept the assumptions, and the argument is well formed and valid, then the conclusion must be true and correct.

All philosophers are mortal
Socrates is a philosopher
therefore Socrates is mortal

If there is a philosopher who is immortal, or if Socrates is not a philosopher the argument fails; but if you accept the assumptions, the conclusion must be correct

One of the useful offshoots of this method is the categorisation of invalid types of argument that are known as **fallacies**. Knowledge of the types of fallacies helps you spot an invalid or illogical argument.

Here are a few examples :

- The *ad-hominem attack* – attacking someone's argument based on their character instead of the basis of their argument, e.g. “You would say that, you're biased!”
- *Appeal to authority* – supporting your argument by presenting an authority that either has no knowledge of the subject or hasn't actually expressed any view on it at all, e.g. “I saw Professor X on YouTube say unicorns exist, so it must be true!”
- *Begging the question* – stating the conclusion as part of your premise, e.g. “Same sex marriage is wrong, because marriage is only between a man and a woman!”
- *Burden of proof* – shifting the burden of proof in an argument to the other party, when you have not yet demonstrated the validity of yours, e.g. “ If you can't prove God doesn't exist, he must!”

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Atheism, Agnosticism and Secularism

The term atheism is generally misunderstood.

Simply speaking a *theist* is someone who believes the claim that there is a god, and an **atheist** is someone who does not. If they do not, they may assert that there is no god (strong atheism) or that they do not know but doubt it (weak atheism).

On the other hand a *gnostic* is someone who claims to know something for a fact and an **agnostic** does not make that claim. Thus it is possible to be an *agnostic-atheist*, if you don't believe in the existence of God but don't claim to know for sure that he does not exist; similar to a weak atheist.

Many, if not most, religious individuals are *gnostic-theists* – they believe that God exists and claim to know he does (but without verifiable evidence) – but some are *agnostic-theists*, they believe that God exists but don't claim to know this is true.

Atheism is a relatively new term because historically claiming the non-existence of God was punishable by death. An early example of this was Socrates, the Greek philosopher who was tried for impiety (disrespecting the gods), found guilty and sentenced to death – by drinking hemlock, a poison.

Some opponents accuse atheism of just being another kind of faith. They say that the passion with which some atheists denounce the existence of God is evidence of their deep passion, faith or belief – thus casting atheists as hypocritical.

This is an empty argument.

If you substitute *stamp collecting* for “believing in God”, then *not stamp collecting* is not a perverse form of stamp collecting: there are no degrees of *not stamp collecting*; you can't be a passionate *not stamp collector*; and you can't try really, really hard to *not collect stamps*.

It is the absence of a thing as atheism is the absence of faith.

But atheism often leads to **secularism**, a belief that religion should not run our society.

This is a logical conclusion for someone who doesn't believe in God. If I don't believe an entity exists then I don't want the people who believe in him, and believe in his/her morality, running my society and making my laws.

But this has not been the case historically; for many thousands of years religion has been heavily intertwined with the governing of society if not actually being the governing force. This has often led to the persecution of other religious groups, conflict or war. Even today, religious groups have a disproportionate amount of influence in secular politics.

Secularists believe while laws are based on **morals**, that there is no need to use an external reference, like a religious text, for this. With human powers of observation and deduction we can create laws that are moral in our own context.

Note it is also possible to be a religious secularist – you can believe in God and still think religion should not govern a society.



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Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Are atheists scared of dying?** Some are, some aren't – but none of them invent tales of eternal life in order to avoid considering it. Atheists contend the absence of a 'second chance' drives them to live good and useful lives the first time.
2. **Atheists can't prove that God doesn't exist!** True. Such a proof is probably impossible, but so is proving that a god exists. And in what other area of life would we accept such assertions without proof or evidence? If a used car salesman told you that your car would live for ever would you believe him?
3. **Atheists hate religious people** : Not true, but atheists often object to religious practices or beliefs that are outdated or have no reasonable basis. For example several religions endorse or encourage circumcision of males or females. Female circumcision in particular is abhorrent, unnecessary and dangerous.
4. **Atheists have no morals** : This is often asserted by those who claim to take their morals from a single source, like religious scripture. But no human stands as an island and we are **all** influenced by many forces in our society. An atheist considers all sources of information available to them and applies a rational judgement to establish a consistent moral code.
5. **Atheists are just in denial** – Mostly not true. To declare yourself an atheist requires at least a minimal conviction that God does not exist. Many atheists would be convinced by a rational argument but none has ever been presented.

References and further reading

<http://www.atheistalliance.org/> - Atheist Alliance International

<http://atheistfoundation.org.au/> - Atheist Foundation of Australia

<http://www.richarddawkins.net/> - Dawkins Foundation for Science & Reason

<http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/> - Common logical fallacies

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/> - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu/> - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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NakedApe specialises in cool atheist / agnostic / humanist pro-science / skeptical / irreligious t-shirts which are fun to wear.

We champion science, reason and free speech.

We think that modern society should be tolerant, pluralist and funny. We respect the right of people to believe whatever they would like to believe, to express those beliefs publicly and to engage in reasoned debate without fear or recrimination.

Our products are cheeky and playful but stop short of being openly hostile unless you happen to be narrow-minded or incapable of grasping humour.

We're proudly West Australian and we're based in Perth... which is a little past Dubbo for people from Sydney.

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