

Atheism

Basic Facts

Key Figures

Nineteenth-century atheists: While atheism as a belief system has been around from thousands of years, it grew dramatically through the writings of atheist philosophers like **Frederick Nietzsche** (1844-1900) and **Karl Marx** (1818-1883). Nietzsche criticized Christian morality and called for human beings to establish a new standard of morality apart from God, while Marx saw religion primarily as an oppressive political force to be overcome. The evolutionary writings of **Charles Darwin** (1809-1882) provided many atheists with a scientific basis for their rejection of God.

The "New Atheists": Recently, a number of bestselling atheist writers have been dubbed the "New Atheists," including **Richard Dawkins** (b. 1941), a prominent evolutionary biologist; **Christopher Hitchens** (b. 1949), a journalist and author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; and **Sam Harris** (b. 1967), author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. As a group, they argue that religion should be forcefully rejected as harmful to society. While their books have been bestsellers, it's unclear whether their success indicates a new rise of militant atheism or a brief fad motivated by reactions to current religious conflicts.

Geography

Worldwide, but with larger numbers in Communist and post-Communist countries.

Adherents

Slightly more than 1 billion people worldwide profess to be nonreligious, but very few are strict atheists. There are perhaps 200 million true atheists worldwide. Estimates range from 750,000 to 1.6 million Americans who are true atheists.

Basic Beliefs

Atheism's core belief is that there is no god. From this basic belief come three other common beliefs. Note that all three of these beliefs don't necessarily depend on atheism (for example, there are many Christians who accept forms of humanism and naturalism), and not all atheists necessarily accept them.

Humanism

"Humanism" is the idea that human beings are the proper focus of concern and the proper basis of belief. For example, a humanist might teach human beings create standards of morality for themselves, rather than morality coming from an objective or divine source.

Naturalism

Naturalism, as opposed to "supernaturalism," looks to natural, mechanical explanations for the world around us. For example, whereas a Christian might explain their feelings of worship as being triggered by the presence of God, a strict naturalist would argue that, no, these feelings are merely chemical changes in our brain triggered by certain environmental causes.

Materialism

Materialism denies the existence of spirits or a spiritual world. Instead, the material world is "all there is."

Atheism vs. Agnosticism

It's important to distinguish "atheism," the belief that there is no God, from "agnosticism," the attitude that one cannot tell whether God exists or not. Each is also different from "secularism," which combines tolerance from a variety of beliefs with the idea of a common, non-religious basis for civil society.