

Atheism

Objectives

To learn about atheism (a common belief in these days) and to be able to withstand in front of atheists and to be sure of your Christian faith.

References

<http://www.stmarkdc.org/practical-atheist>

Scriptural Verses

“The fool has said in his heart: There is no God. They are corrupt, and have done abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. Every one of them has turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one” (Psalm 53: 1-3).

Lesson Outline

What is atheism?

- ❖ Rejection of belief in the existence of God.
- ❖ The term atheism originated from the Greek *ἄθεος* (atheos), meaning "without gods", which was applied with a negative connotation to those thought to reject the gods worshiped by the larger society.

Atheist demographics

- ❖ The first individuals to identify themselves as "atheist" appeared in the 18th century.
- ❖ Today, about 2.3% of the world's population describes itself as atheist, while a further 11.9% is described as nonreligious.
- ❖ Between 64% and 65% of Japanese describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or non-believers vs. 48% in Russia.
- ❖ The percentage of such persons in European Union member states ranges as low as single digits in Italy and some other countries, and up to 85% in Sweden.

Atheist mentality

- ❖ Atheists tend to lean towards skepticism regarding supernatural claims, citing a lack of empirical evidence.
- ❖ Common rationales for not believing in God include the problem of evil, the argument from inconsistent revelations, and the argument from non-belief.

- ❖ Other arguments for atheism range from the philosophical to the social to the historical. Although some atheists tend toward secular philosophies such as humanism, rationalism, and naturalism, there is no one ideology or set of behaviors to which all atheists adhere.
- ❖ In Western culture, atheists are frequently assumed to be exclusively irreligious or unspiritual. However, religious and spiritual belief systems such as forms of Buddhism that do not advocate belief in God have also been described as atheistic.

Types of atheism

- ❖ Writers disagree on how best to define and classify atheism.
- ❖ What supernatural entities does it apply to?
- ❖ Is it an assertion in its own right or merely the absence of one?
- ❖ Does it require a conscious, explicit rejection?

A variety of categories have been proposed to try to distinguish the different forms of atheism

Range

- ❖ Some of the ambiguity and controversy involved in defining atheism arises from difficulty in reaching a consensus for the definitions of words like deity and god.
- ❖ The ancient Romans accused Christians of being atheists for not worshipping the pagan deities. In the 20th century, this view fell into disfavor as theism came to be understood as encompassing belief in any divinity.
- ❖ Atheism may counter anything from the existence of a deity, to the existence of any spiritual, supernatural, or transcendental concepts, such as those of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Implicit vs. Explicit

- ❖ Definitions of atheism also vary in the degree of consideration a person must put to the idea of gods to be considered an atheist.
- ❖ Atheism has sometimes been defined to include the simple absence of belief that any deities exist. This broad definition would include newborns and other people who have not been exposed to theistic ideas.
- ❖ As far back as 1772, Baron d'Holbach said that "All children are born atheists; they have no idea of God".
- ❖ Similarly, George H. Smith (1979) suggested that: "The man who is unacquainted with theism is an atheist because he does not believe in a god. This category would also include the child with the conceptual capacity to grasp the issues involved, but who is

still unaware of those issues. The fact that this child does not believe in god qualifies him as an atheist”

- ❖ Smith coined the term implicit atheism to refer to "the absence of theistic belief without a conscious rejection of it" and explicit atheism to refer to the more common definition of conscious disbelief.
- ❖ In Western civilization, the view that children are born atheist is relatively recent. Before the 18th century, the existence of God was so universally accepted in the western world that even the possibility of true atheism was questioned. This is called theistic innatism—the notion that all people believe in God from birth; within this view was the connotation that atheists are simply in denial.

Apatheism (practical atheism)

- ❖ In practical, or pragmatic, atheism, also known as apatheism, individuals live as if there are no gods and explain natural phenomena without resorting to the divine.
- ❖ The existence of gods is not denied, but may be designated unnecessary or useless; gods neither provide purpose to life, nor influence everyday life, according to this view
- ❖ An apatheist is also someone who is not interested in accepting or denying any claims that gods exist or do not exist. In other words, an apatheist is someone who considers the question of the existence of gods as neither meaningful nor relevant to his or her life.
- ❖ Absence of religious motivation — belief in gods do not motivate moral action, religious action, or any other form of action.
- ❖ Indifference — the absence of any interest in the problems of gods and religion.
- ❖ Not in My Power — if god(s) want people to believe in them, they need only to demonstrate their existence. There is nothing humans can do to prove the existence of a god, and gods are the only force that can prove their existence, therefore the choice of human faith lies not on the shoulders of humans, but god.

Theoretical atheism

- ❖ Logical atheism holds that the various conceptions of gods, such as the personal god of Christianity, are ascribed logically inconsistent qualities.
- ❖ Such atheists assert the incompatibility between certain traits, such as perfection, creator-status, immutability, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, transcendence, personhood (a personal being), nonphysicality, justice and mercy.
- ❖ They believe that the world as they experience it cannot be reconciled with the qualities commonly ascribed to God and gods by theologians.
- ❖ They argue that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God is not compatible with a world where there is evil and suffering, and where divine love is hidden from many people.

Atheist view of theism

- ❖ Philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud argued that God and other religious beliefs are human inventions, created to fulfill various psychological and emotional wants or needs.
- ❖ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, influenced by the work of Feuerbach, argued that belief in God and religion are social functions, used by those in power to oppress the working class.
- ❖ According to Mikhail Bakunin, "the idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, in theory and practice."
- ❖ He reversed Voltaire's famous saying that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him, writing instead that "if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him."

Other forms of atheism

- ❖ People who self-identify as atheists are often assumed to be irreligious; however, some sects within major religions reject the existence of a personal, creator deity.
- ❖ In recent years, certain religious denominations have accumulated a number of openly atheistic followers, such as atheistic or humanistic Judaism and Christian atheists.

Christian atheism

- ❖ Christian Atheism is a belief system in which the God of Christianity is rejected but the moral teachings of Jesus are followed.
- ❖ Four common beliefs:
 1. The assertion of the unreality of God for our age, including the understandings of God which have been a part of traditional Christian theology.
 2. The insistence upon coming to grips with contemporary culture as a necessary feature of responsible theological work.
 3. Varying degrees and forms of alienation from the church as it is now constituted
 4. Recognition of the centrality of the person of Jesus in theological reflection.

Christian atheism: God's existence

- ❖ According to Paul van Buren, a Death of God theologian, the word God itself is "either meaningless or misleading." He contends that it is impossible to think about God.
- ❖ Van Buren says that: "we cannot identify anything which will count for or against the truth of our statements concerning 'God'."

- ❖ Most Christian Atheists believe that God never existed, but there are a few who believe in the death of God literally. Thomas J. J. Altizer is a well known Christian Atheist who is known for his literal approach to the death of God.
- ❖ He often speaks of God's death as a redemptive event. In his book *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* he speaks of how "every man today who is open to experience knows that God is absent, but only the Christian knows that God is dead, that the death of God is a final and irrevocable event, and that God's death has actualized in our history a new and liberated humanity."

Christian atheism: Separation from the Church

- ❖ Altizer has said that "the radical Christian... believes that the ecclesiastical tradition has ceased to be Christian."
- ❖ He believed that orthodox Christianity no longer had any meaning to people because it did not discuss Christianity within the context of contemporary theology.
- ❖ Christian Atheists want to be completely separated from most orthodox Christian beliefs and biblical traditions. Altizer states that faith "can never identify itself with an ecclesiastical tradition or with a given doctrinal or ritual form."
- ❖ Faith cannot "have any final assurance as to what it means to be a Christian".
- ❖ "We must not, seek for the sacred by saying 'no' to the radical profanity of our age, but by saying 'yes' to it".
- ❖ They see religions which withdraw from the world as moving away from truth. This is part of the reason why they see the existence of God as counter progressive.
- ❖ Altizer wrote of God as the enemy to man because mankind could never reach its fullest potential while God existed.
- ❖ He went on to state that "to cling to the Christian God in our time is to evade the human situation of our century and to renounce the inevitable suffering which is its lot".

Christian atheism: Jesus

- ❖ Jesus, although not seen as divine, is still a central feature of Christian Atheism.
- ❖ Most Christian Atheists think of Jesus as a wise and good man, accepting his moral teachings but rejecting the idea of his divinity.
- ❖ Hamilton said that to the Christian Atheist, Jesus is not really the foundation of faith; instead he is an example of what a Christian should be, but they do not see him as a God.
- ❖ Christian Atheists criticize orthodox Christians for not living in the world, and for not being connected to the rest of humanity.
- ❖ Hamilton wrote that to follow Jesus means to be human, to help other humans, and to further mankind.

Arguments for Christianity

1- The origin of the universe

- ❖ Why does everything exist?
- ❖ Atheists say the Universe is eternal and uncaused.
- ❖ Even science believes in the big bang theory based on astrophysical evidence.
- ❖ Scientists agree that space and time were created in the big bang. Space and time did not exist beforehand.
- ❖ Therefore the cause if the universe must be timeless and changeless!!!. Must transcend space because it created space!!!. Cannot be physical.
- ❖ Also must be personal to make a freewill choice to create something at a certain time.

2- Complex order of the universe

- ❖ Physical constants of the Universe are just right to support life.
- ❖ Unique properties of water required to sustain life.
 - ❖ Universal Solvent – allows chemical reactions.
 - ❖ Expands (and floats) when it freezes – “If water froze from the bottom up, much of Earth's water would solidify in winter, and life might be impossible.”
 - ❖ Many more...
- ❖ 0.25% of total solar plane area supports life.

3- Objective morals values

- ❖ The existence of absolute moral values require that a god exists.
- ❖ Moral values exist regardless of if someone believes in that god or not.
- ❖ This is a problem with all other philosophies that attempt to define morality apart from the existence of God.

4- History of Jesus of Nazareth

- ❖ Historic evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.
- ❖ Three established facts recognized by historians:
 - ❖ On the Sunday following his crucifixion, the tomb was discovered empty by a group of his women followers.
 - ❖ On separate occasions separate individuals and groups saw appearances of the Lord Jesus alive after His death.
 - ❖ The original disciples suddenly came to believe in the resurrection despite having every disposition to the contrary. They subsequently were killed for this same faith.

5- The immediate experience of God

- ❖ God’s existence must not be “proven” to satisfy all skeptics.
- ❖ “Proofs for God could actually distract your attention from God Himself. If you are sincerely seeking God then God will make His existence clear to you.” – William Craig
- ❖ If God wanted to prove Himself without a shadow of a doubt, He could.
- ❖ Those that have experienced God were willing to die for their faith.

- ❖ How many atheists would do the same?

Conclusion

- ❖ Atheism is a denial of God:
 - ❖ Feeling in control of one's destiny.
 - ❖ Worshipping the power and achievement of man.
 - ❖ Incorrectly interpreting God's commandments as restrictive instead of liberating.
 - ❖ Being absorbed by the world and not making an effort to seek the truth.
 - ❖ Wanting to be immortal without realizing that we already are.
- ❖ Atheists need prayer and examples of real Christians, not scientific proofs.

Activities / Discussion Points

Make the first 2 points in "Arguments for Christianity" (The origin of the universe and Complex order of the universe) a workshop to clarify how all these arguments have been denied by the scientists themselves and many of them returned to God assuring His almighty presence.