

What is Atheism, Secularism, Humanism

3. A History of Atheism and Freethought

Although modern-style atheism and secularism have not always existed, both have a long and diverse history

- “Freethought” is a more inclusive term for all forms of questioning and rejection of received religious belief and authority
- Bertrand Russell 1957 “The Value of Free Thought”: “What makes a freethinker is not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because his elders told him they were true when he was young, or if he holds them because if he did not he would be unhappy, his thought is not free; *but if he holds them because, after careful thought he finds a balance of evidence in their favor, then his thought is free, however odd his conclusions may seem.*”

In some estimations, the first freethinker in recorded history was the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton (1353-36 BCE)



- Replaced the traditional gods with the monotheistic religion of Aten (the sun)
- He was regarded as a “heretic king” and his cult was expunged after his death
- A papyrus from around that era reads: “Since the time of our ancestors, generations have come and gone and been replaced. The gods who lived in former time, rest in their pyramids, the dead nobles too are buried in their pyramids. And those who built the tombs—the places have disappeared. What has happened to them?”

During the so-called Axial age (circa 600 BCE) many traditions challenged traditional authority or proposed natural or moral systems without god(s)

- Confucius has been described as an “agnostic and a rationalist” whose moral code did not depend on deities
- Daoism proposed a naturalistic basis for morality and government, with no explicit interest in god(s)
- The Buddha taught a lesson of suffering and salvation that ignored god(s)—we do not know if god(s) exist or not, they cannot save us, and if they exist they suffer and perish like everything else
- Jainism: a non-theistic philosophy/religion of virtue and non-violence
- Even sects of Hinduism dispensed with traditional rituals and concepts like karma; Mimamsa, Samkhya, and Vendanta schools were all a-theistic

The most radical and original thinking emerged in early Greece

- Anaximander (c. 610-546) was among the first pre-Socratic philosophers to suggest a materialist theory of the universe
- All matter reducible to water (Thales), fire, Anaximenes), Heraclietus (fire), etc.
- Heraclietus wrote “This world that is the same for all, neither any god or any man shaped it”
- Xenophanes explained that our images of god(s) are mere anthropomorphism: People’s gods look and act like them. “But if oxen or horses or lions had hands and could draw . . . the horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and the oxen of gods like oxen, and each would give them bodies like its own.”



Philosophers also noticed that the myths of god(s) were confused and contradictory, and that the gods were not always virtuous

- Theognis around 500 BCE wrote, “Dear Zeus, you baffle me. You are king of all; the highest honor and greatest power are yours, you discern what goes on in each man’s secret heart, and your lordship is supreme. Yet you make no distinction between the sinner and the good man, between the man who devotes himself to temperate and responsible acts and the man who commits deeds of hubris. Tell me, son of Cronus, how can you deal such unfairness?”
- Sophocles in his famous play about Oedipus had his chorus sing, “O Zeus the mighty, if you are properly so called,” since the deity seems to have lost the power of prophecy and control over human affairs.

Possibly the first open atheist in recorded history was Diagoras who composed *Arguments that Knock Down Towers*, introducing the image of the disbeliever as *theomakhos*, “battler of the gods,” a powerful, masculine vanquisher of the gods...who made the deity (*-theos*) disappear (*a-*)’

- In ancient Greece (and Rome), your beliefs were less important than your actions
- “impiety” (*asebeia*). meant showing disrespect for god(s) or refusing to participate in the local ritual system
- Diagoras was charged with impiety for doubting that the god(s) punished iniquity
- Other public figures were likewise charged for impious behavior or teachings
- Socrates is the most famous case of the death penalty for impiety—although he denied atheism



Various Hellenistic schools of philosophy questioned god(s) in their own way

- Stoic Persaeus denied the existence of god(s) but recommended their worship in the conventional way
- Cynics disputed all traditions and dogmas including religion but were mainly uninterested
- Skeptics doubted the certainty of all human opinions
- Carneades (mid-100s BCE) concluded that “belief in gods is illogical” and compiled the oldest known collection of atheist arguments
- God(s) subject to pain and decay; gods not morally perfect; boundary between humans and god(s) blurry and uncertain
- His successor Clitomachus wrote *On Atheism*, summarizing the history of religious skepticism

In the Roman empire, impiety toward god(s) was also seen as disloyalty and disobedience to the emperor

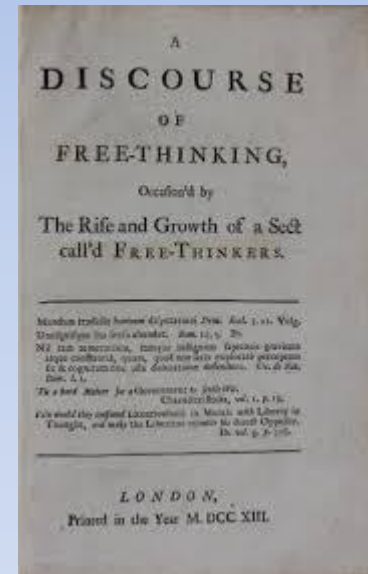
- Religion was a civil-political act, especially sacrificing to the emperor
- By the second Christian century, Roman traditionalists and Christians were locked in protracted religious contests
- Christians called Romans “pagans” and “heretics”
- Romans called Christians “atheists” —although their crime was more political than spiritual
- Romans were afraid that Christian disrespect would bring down the wrath of the gods
- Athenagoras wrote a letter to Marcus Aurelius explaining that Christians were theists and not atheists

Once Christianity conquered the empire, Christians turned the charge of atheism against their rivals

- Edict of 380 accused non-Christians (even just non-trinitarians) of being *dementes vesanosque* (demented lunatics)
- Made no distinction is drawn between polytheists, atheists, Jews, and theologically unsound Christians
- It made sense to Christians to speak of “pagan atheists” or “atheist polytheists”
- Multiple interpretations and sects of Christians challenged Church authority from the first centuries of Christianity continuously through the 1500s
- Inquisitions and crusades were conducted to root out freethought

Freethinker movements within pre-modern Christianity included

- Arians
- Unitarians
- Albigensians/Cathars
- Hussites
- Martin Luther's "protestants": follow your conscience and *sola scriptura*
- The term "free-thinker" appeared in late-1600s England for those who resisted the institutional church and a literalist interpretation of scripture
- 1713 Anthony Collins wrote *Discourse on Free-Thinking*, attacking the church and advocating for deism



The Enlightenment (late 1600s-1700s) was the first age of systematic sustained criticism of religion

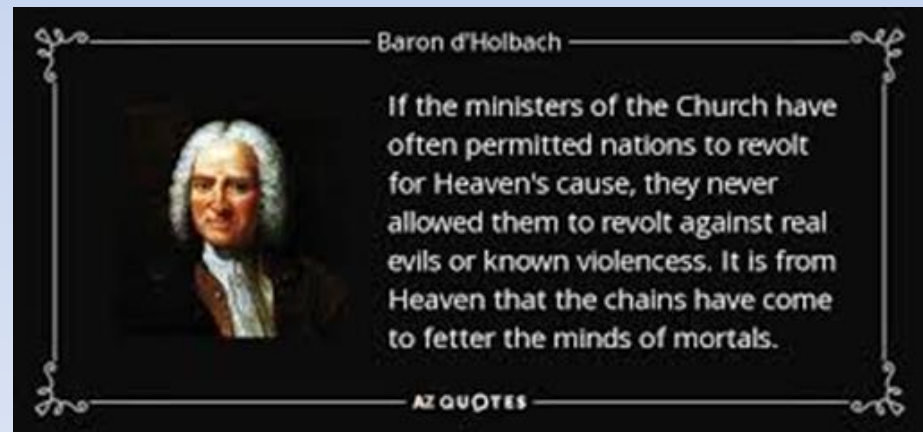
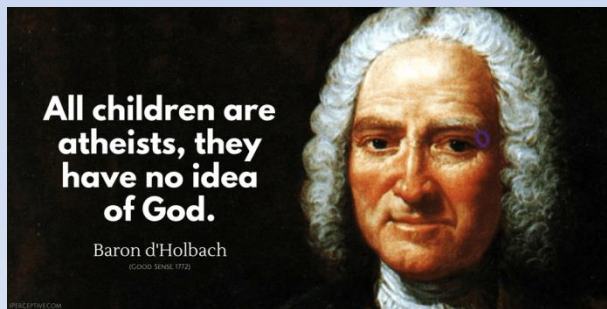
- French *philosophes* criticized the Catholic Church and its association with the absolutism of the monarchy
- Although many were Christians, they favored a rational and tolerant religion, often deism
- Voltaire championed religious freedom and church-state separation
- In a 1767 letter he wrote, “Ours [i.e., the Christian religion] is assuredly the most ridiculous, the most absurd and the most bloody religion which has ever infected this world. Your Majesty will do the human race an eternal service by extirpating this infamous superstition”

Rousseau believed religion was socially necessary but favored a “civil religion” designed for a specific country

- He was reportedly disgusted by the Christianity of his time
- Denis Diderot became a skeptic and then eventually an atheist
- 1747 *The Skeptic's Walk* he wrote, “Superstition is more injurious to God than atheism” and “Skepticism is the first step towards truth”

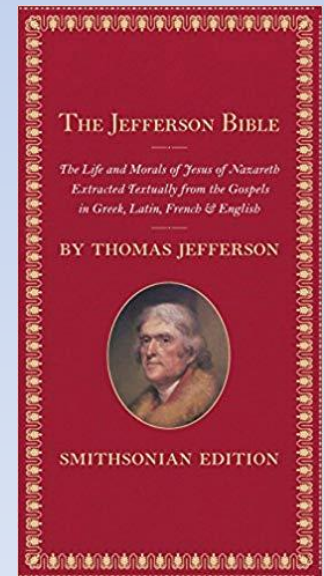
Baron d'Holbach (Paul-Henri Thiry) was the most openly atheistic of the French Enlightenment thinkers

- 1767 *Christianity Unveiled* argued that Christianity and religion work against the moral advancement of humanity
- 1770 *System of Nature* theorized an entirely material and godless universe



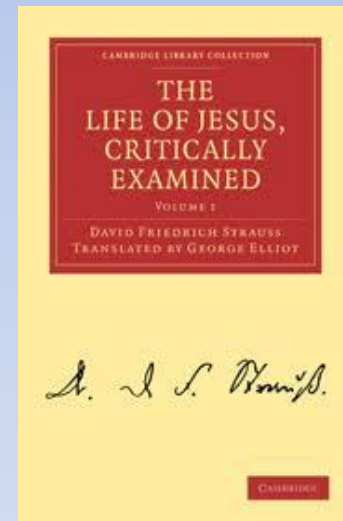
In England, David Hume criticized biblical or “revealed” religion in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

- He also questioned miracles, concluding they were most likely errors, delusions, or fakes
- He rejected claims about the moral superiority of religion: “the Morality of every Religion was bad and ...that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded that he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious”
- All of the American “founding fathers” were influenced by Enlightenment thinking, and most were deists or non-religious
- Jefferson edited his own version of the Bible, removing miracles and the resurrection of Jesus



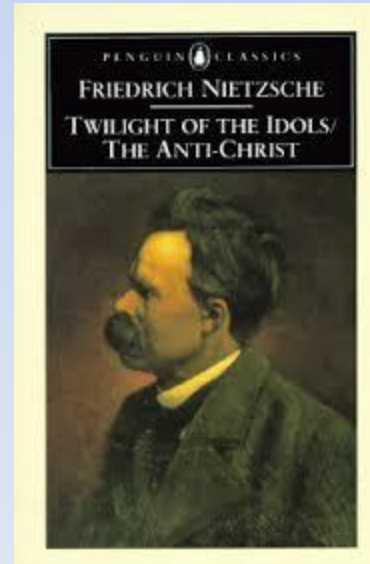
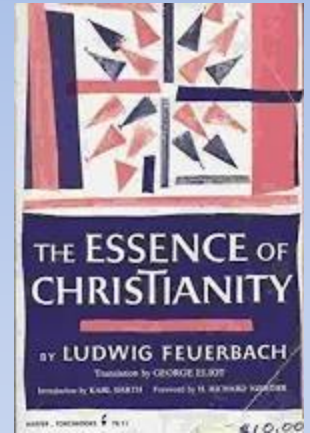
Christian belief came under increased pressure by scholars in the 1800s

- “Biblical criticism” treated the Bible like any other book, discovering multiple sources written at different times and cobbled together
- Biographical studies of Jesus (e.g. Ernst Renan’s 1863 *Life of Jesus* and David Strauss’ 1835 *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*) found little historical evidence for such a person and questioned many of his alleged sayings and actions
- Subsequent cross-cultural research showed that the dying god-man motif was common in the ancient world (e.g. Kersey Graves’ 1875 *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors: Or, Christianity Before Christ*)



Philosophers continued to debunk Christianity

- Ludwig Feuerbach 1841 *The Essence of Christianity*: Christianity is merely the projection of human thoughts and desires onto a putative supernatural realm
- Karl Marx: religion is a “false consciousness,” a displacement of practical economic needs and a means of controlling the masses, and will disappear when human needs are actually fulfilled
- Friedrich Nietzsche: Christianity is “slave morality” fit only for the weak and sick—in fact, it encourages people to be weak and sick

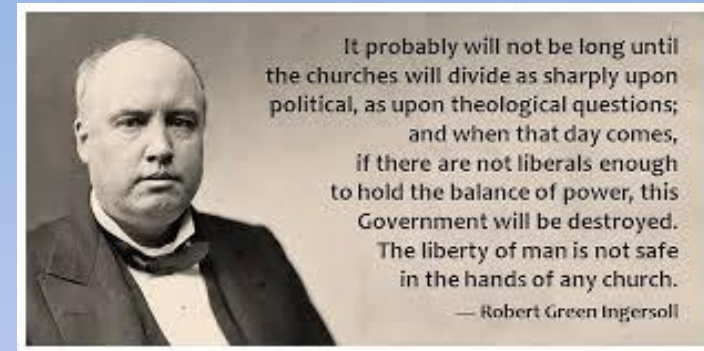


By the second half of the 1800s, freethought, religious skepticism, and even atheism were common and popular

- Darwin's evolutionary theory provided a way to explain the origin of species without divine intervention
- Freethinker organizations and publications were started in Europe and America
- American Secular Union 1884, attacking church tax exemptions and religious instruction in schools
- Ethical Society (England) 1888, rejecting god, promoting good works, and providing alternatives to Sunday worship
- *The Freethinker* magazine 1881, explicitly atheist, humanist, and anti-religion

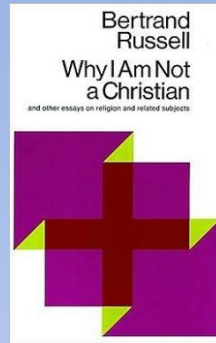


The most popular American
secularist/freethinker of the 19th century
was Robert Green Ingersoll



- “When I became convinced that the universe is natural, that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell. The dungeon was flooded with light and all the bolts and bars and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf, or a slave. There was for me no master in all the wide world, not even in infinite space. I was free—free to think, to express my thoughts—free to live my own ideal, free to live for myself and those I loved, free to use all my faculties, all my senses, free to spread imagination’s wings, free to investigate, to guess and dream and hope, free to judge and determine for myself . . . I was free! I stood erect and fearlessly, joyously faced all worlds.”

Secularism, atheism, and anti-Christianity continued to grow and normalize in the 20th century



- Bertrand Russell 1927 *Why I am Not a Christian*
- Based on Marxism, officially atheist regimes emerged in Russia, China, and other communist countries
- Logical positivists like A. J. Ayer (*Language, Truth, and Logic* 1936 and *The Problem of Knowledge* 1956) asserted that religious sentences are unverifiable and meaningless
- Pragmatists like John Dewey believed that the natural world was self-sufficient, denying god(s) and immortality
- Big Bang cosmology provided a theory of the origin of the universe without god(s)

