Atheism

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Atheism

Introduction

Historical attitudes in Judaism and Christianity towards atheism, that is, disbelief in God, are complicated and have shifted over time, sometimes reflecting an awareness of the other’s views and sometimes not. Here, sceptical tendencies, that is, attitudes and ideas that would be associated later with atheism, will be considered alongside claims about atheism per se.

Ancient and Hellenistic

The Hebrew Bible hints at the idea of atheism with naval or fool: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” and goes on to suggest that such individuals are “corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good” (Ps 14:1). This emphasis on practical atheism, that is, living one’s life as though God did not exist, is also found in the New Testament, for example, in Jesus’ parable of the man who built a barn with no thought of God (Lk 12:16–21) or James’s criticism of arrogant Christians who planned out their lives and business dealings without consideration of God’s will (Jas 4:13–17), or Paul’s condemnation of those whose denial of God’s eternal power and divine nature, which is self-evident from creation and “clearly seen,” leaves them without excuse (Rom 1:18–32). In the 1st-cent. CE, Philo describes those for whom nothing exists but the visible universe, which was eternal, without a pilot, guardian or protector (Somn.
And likewise Josephus, writing in the 1st cent. CE, condemned those epicureans who denied providence and believed that the universe governed itself without a divine ruler, as a threat to the social order, for without a pilot how could any ship navigate safely? (Ant. X:11:7). With such definitions, neither Jews nor Christians could be regarded as atheists, but that is certainly not how much of the Graeco-Roman world viewed them. Josephus himself was obliged to defend Judaism against the charge of atheism for refusing to recognise the official pantheon of the Graeco-Roman gods and for insisting instead upon the invisible God (Contra Apionem 2:6). And Christians responded in a similar way; as the 2nd cent. apologist Justin Martyr put it, “We [Christians] confess that we are atheists (atheoi), so far as [the pagan] gods of this sort are concerned” (Apologia 1:5–6).

In the Rabbinic literature the phrase kofer be’ikkar (one who cuts [denies] a root [principle]), which occurs for the first time in bShab 16b, is often understood to include “one who denies God” in the sense that denying the fundamental principle or truth of God’s existence and unity is effectively denying God. Another important term is min, usually translated as “heretic” or “apostate” and amongst the “heresies” of the min is atheism, at least according to Maimonides’s medieval reading to which we shall return. Another category of sceptic included the “Epicurean” (apikoros) who is associated in the Mishnah with scoffers who denied Pharisaic conceptions of the resurrection and revelation (mSan 10:1) and who was associated in the Talmud with other minim who caused the people to sin (tSan 13:4–5). There is also a warning that while one should learn how to refute a non-Jewish Epicurean, one should avoid debating with a Jewish Epicurean since it would only likely confirm him in the error of his ways (bSan 38b). Perhaps most famously, there is also the mysterious figure of Elisha ben Abuya, who, according to tradition, was a gifted legal scholar in the 1st cent. who came to doubt God’s existence either as a result of observing the death of a Torah-observant child or the humiliating death of a Jewish sage (yChag. 2:1), that is, as a result of the problem of evil and suffering; the Talmud went on to refer to him as acher or “other” and condemned him for turning others away from the Torah.

Debates concerning similar challenges to belief are found in the writings of the church fathers in the 4th and 5th cent. Those such as the speculative theologians of Alexandria (Athanasius, Didymus and Cyril) also responded to the need to address questions concerning God’s existence, which were deemed necessary since he could not be perceived or comprehended, or, as Cyril put it, God was “without quantity” and “without form” (Cyril, Dialogues on the Trinity, 391c). For them, while God’s nature was beyond human understanding, they suggested that he could be known through creation and the human soul which was created in the divine image. Likewise, Augustine (384–430) compiled lists of arguments in support of belief in the existence of God, condemning three “grave impieties” which included the denial of divine existence, of divine justice, and of providential governance (Augustine, Exposition of the Psalms, Exp 2 Ps. 31).

Medieval
Throughout the medieval period, writings that listed the rational weaknesses of disbelief continued to proliferate among both Jews and Christians, and it is difficult to know who was influencing whom. The ontological argument for God’s existence by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) in his *Proslogion* (that is, God is the most perfect being of which one can conceive and since a conception of God that did not exist would be less perfect than one that did exist, therefore God must exist) was likely not only intended to counter atheistic arguments but also to champion a Christian conception of the deity against Jewish and Muslim charges of Christianity’s irrationality. Often Jewish and Christian arguments against disbelief were similar because of their shared interest in classical philosophy. The towering figure of medieval Jewish philosophy, Maimonides (1138–1205), wrote in *The Guide to the Perplexed* 17 of

“those who do not recognize the existence of God […] and instead believe that the existing state of things is the result of accidental combination and separation of the elements, and that the universe has no ruler or governor.

Such as these, who followed “Epicurus and his school, and similar philosophies,” could be readily dismissed; as Maimonides put it, “It would be superfluous to repeat their views, since the existence of God has been demonstrated,” referring to Aristotle’s belief that something had thought this world into existence and motion. But for our purposes, the more important idea to which Maimonides lent his significant authority and influence was that faith was defined in terms of theological or credal beliefs in such a way that one could lose one’s place in the world to come for disbelief in the existence of God and related ideas such as Torah-from-heaven or divine providence, so that atheistic beliefs were seen to have existential consequences. Maimonides firmly supported the claim within Jewish tradition that

“ The following have no share in the world to come, but are cut off, and perish, and receive their punishment for all time for their great sin […] he who says there is no God and the world has no guide […] (*Mishneh Torah* Repentance 3:6-8; cf. his *Commentary on the Mishnah* on *mSan* 10.1).

Amongst those Maimonides influenced outside Judaism was the most important Christian critic of atheism in the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas (1228–1274), who also read Ibn Gabriol, to whom we shall return, and who set out a series of arguments or proofs for the existence of God, including the necessity for an unmoved mover, a self-caused cause, a necessary being, and an ultimate source of perfection (*Summa Theologica*).

Despite all this concern to counter disbelief, modern atheism arguably has its origins in medieval Christian theological developments, rather than in, say, modern scientific developments or the generic problem of evil. Arguably, its origins lie with the claim of John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) that being and existence is a single category, with the implication that there is no essential difference between human being and divine being, and thus the divine is accessible by reason as well as by revelation. For if being and existence, and
all that there is, is a single category, then just as the world can be understood through reason, one can expect that God’s existence and nature can be similarly comprehended through rationality as well as by revelation. Duns Scotus did not realize the implications of this idea. But insofar as the theologian accepts the new epistemological stance that reversed God’s position from the source of all to an object of rational analysis and thus comprehensible to human thought, at least to some extent, then both the theologian and the atheist will share certain assumptions, with profound consequences for the rise of atheism. If the theologian assumes, for example, that certainty about truth in the world is possible and is accessible to reason/scientific investigation, and, as a consequence, becomes less interested in analogical or metaphorical language about God because of its inferior analytical power and imprecision, then he has already conceded key ground to the atheist. This is because a definition of God that is shared by theologian and atheist arguably does not encompass the God of Jewish and Christian tradition, who is characteristically approached analogically in the scriptures, traditions and in pre-modern theology.

When one considers Jewish thinkers who espoused atheistic tendencies, the list includes some of the greatest religious authorities in Jewish history. The 11th-century poet and philosopher Solomon Ibn Gabriol (c.1021–c.1070) and his connection to Duns Scotus’s thought is a case in point. Duns Scotus was familiar with the work of Ibn Gabriol and was concerned about many of the same issues. In particular, Ibn Gabriol taught that there was an intimate, mysterious link between God and matter, both being foundational for reality. He articulated a familiar kind of neoplatonism with the idea that form is a kind of expression of God’s will, and all things (including the soul and intellect) are comprised of matter and form. However, unlike other neo-platonists, Ibn Gabriol did not rank form above matter, but rather hinted that there was a kind of equivalence, with the logical implication that to study matter is to study God. This idea of a unitary, universal substance underlying all created things, both corporeal and spiritual, is the point that was so important in Duns Scotus’s thought, and so a case could be made for the theological foundations of modern atheism to lie instead with Ibn Gabriol.

Despite what was said earlier in relation to denouncing disbelief, Maimonides, too, appears to have taught ideas that could be regarded as undermining belief in theism, although he would probably not have seen it that way. Quite apart from insisting upon naturalistic explanations for prophecy and miracles, and privileging scientific knowledge over supernaturalist teachings and traditions, his concern to present the case against anthropomorphism leads famously to his apophatic or negative theology about the nature of God. His stress on the unknowability of God, that is, the idea that we cannot know anything about God other than that he exists, so it is only right to speak about what God is not, that is, in the negative, is highly suggestive of atheism in one of its many guises, for a God who is defined in terms of what one cannot say about him sounds rather like a God whose existence is irrelevant to humankind. Such ideas were reinforced by the 14th-century mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and biblical commentator Gersonides (1288–1344), who, in addition to condemning allegorical interpretations, and explaining miracles in rational terms in his biblical commentaries, came to believe that God has no knowledge of earthly life and is distant, unknowable, and unknowing. Although the medieval period saw the development of Kabbalistic mysticism which taught another kind of apophatic or negative theology, describing God as the Ein Sof (the Undefined and Undefinable), for many such utterly transcendent and mysterious conceptions of God would have been unworthy of pious belief in the God of biblical tradition. Of course, such ideas had been
hinted at since the 4th-cent. speculative Christian theologians of Alexandria, mentioned earlier, and many
medieval Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and John of the Cross (1542–1591)
offered apophatic teachings, too. Within both Christianity and Judaism, then, the medieval focus was on
arguments for the existence of God as an object of rational study that sometimes generated negative
theologies, or apophatic mystical approaches that appeared to deny the God of revelation, and a case can
be made for these religious tendencies making intellectual space for atheistic tendencies. Nevertheless, this
by no means prevented the very same individuals from offering spirited attacks on philosophical positions,
real or imagined, that were regarded as giving succour to atheism.


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Early Modern

Similar lines of reasoning continued into the early modern period. It was generally agreed in 16th-
and
early 17th-cent. Christian Europe that the atheist was either someone who did not believe in the existence
of God or someone who held views that made God’s existence irrelevant: someone who did not believe,
for example, in the immortality of the soul. The Latin and vernacular terms used of such disbelievers
included atheist, Deist, Epicurean, a-Christist, Lucianist, and Libertine. By the late 17th and early 18th
cent. it was increasingly common to describe the offender in a narrower sense, closer to modern usage.
Labels used included materialist, free-thinker, and pantheist, and, in the 19th cent., the evolutionary
biologist Thomas Huxley coined the term agnostic (literally “without knowledge” but specifically referring
to knowledge of God’s existence).

As Jews were emerging from the ghettos, many were embracing the Haskalah or Enlightenment and for
many this meant leaving their religious beliefs behind. Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725–1805), a maskil or
enlightened Jew living in Denmark who was concerned about sceptical tendencies among his fellow Jews,
wrote in the 1760s that “Some of them deny the very existence of God; some claim there is no supreme
guidance and everything occurs by accident; some say there is no Torah or prophecy from the heavens,
and some say man is no way superior to the beasts” (Levanon: Gan Na’ul 1:8:1.) The late 18th-cent. anti-
hasidic Lithuanian rabbi, Israel Loebel, distinguished between atheists who, on the one hand included
moderate deists (who denied divine reward and punishment) and radical deists (who denied revelation),
and on the other hand who included the “new epicureans” (who denied providence and the divine origins
of Torah) whose declaration of belief in God and his commandments was in his view to be regarded as a
decception. With Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) we reach a point when the critics could put a face to the
accusations. For example, Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–65) famously attacked Spinoza as an atheist in
five articles in the 1820s (collated as “Neged Spinoza”) for honoring God in the open while denying his
existence in his heart, and attacked Spinoza’s Ethics for its utility-centered ethics (close to those of the
Epicureans, he said) and for implying that, to the extent that there is any place for religion, it is on account
of the ignorance of the multitude and its intellectual decrepitude. Likewise, according to his autobiography
(Salomon Maimons Lebensgeschichte), the accusation of atheism and epicureanism was made by a number
of people against Salomon Maimon (1753–1800), involving some in Moses Mendelssohn’s circle;
although details are sparse, they include the idea that he was “seeking to spread dangerous systems,”
which probably referred to Spinozan-influenced ideas such as the doctrine of one universal soul, and the
Maimonidian-influenced claim that God does not exist in the same sense that the world exists. Such charges led the religious community in his home village of Glogau in Silesia to refuse Maimon a Jewish burial.

Modern

With the arrival of modernity, the charge of atheism has become commonplace. Whereas before the Enlightenment accusations tended to made against individuals or philosophies, afterwards it was possible to think of atheistic movements and social groups of unashamed disbelievers. The debates as to what constitutes atheism have become part of interfaith discourse, and two specific contexts that have led to accusations of atheism among Jews and Christians are particularly interesting, namely, the conflict between religion and science, and the reappraisal of the problem of evil in the age of genocide. In these contexts, Jewish and Christian thinkers have taken particular interest in the views of each other.

Perhaps the clearest example of the effect of science for undermining belief in the God of the Bible is that of the engagement of Reform Jews in the US in the 19th cent., where Reform has since the 1880s been the dominant Jewish denomination, and which paid close attention to intellectual trends within Christianity. Across European and North America, the culture of scientific progress, and the attendant popular interest in natural philosophy and scientific writings from the 1870s (especially those of Darwin and Haeckel in Germany; Spencer, Darwin, and Huxley in England; and Darwin, Haeckel, Ingersoll and Adler in the US), provoked a sea-change. With increasing conviction, the God of revelational religion simply appeared too naïve to countenance for very many liberal Protestant Christians, and some Jews felt similarly. In the US, a number of Reform Jewish rabbis were provoked by Felix Adler (1851–1933), a former Reform rabbi himself and professor at Cornell and Columbia universities, who instigated the Jewish Ethical Culture movement in 1876 which espoused post-denominational, post-religious, Jewish ethics and social justice, and whose highly knowledgeable attacks on Orthodox Judaism made him a very serious threat. US Reform rabbis began to reconceptualise the Divine in self-consciously modern, unfamiliar ways, and several looked for inspiration to Henry Ward Beecher (1813–87), who was perhaps the best known Christian Darwinist and a revivalist clergyman whose de-anthropomorphized depiction of God was as “the life Universal,” that is, the evolutionary-orientated ubiquitous life force that worked according to the natural law of evolution. Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923), who led the largest Jewish congregation in the US (in Philadelphia) and who co-founded the Jewish Publication Society, argued in 1903 that nature evolved according to that which the natural scientists called “natural law” and theologians called “God.” The spinozist Emil Hirsch (1851–1923) identified God with the universe; as he put it in 1903: “Thus the universe is one soul […] Our God is the soul of the Universe.” Krauskopf, Hirsch, and other religious evolutionists argued that they were theists, and even vehemently anti-atheist, but their emphasis on Divine Law rather than a personal deity sounded suspiciously atheistic to traditionalists’ ears. From the 1920s onwards, a new movement emerged from within Conservative Judaism, also influenced by the evolutionary laws of nature, which would become known as Reconstructionism, and which has had a significant influence on 20th-cent. American Jewish religion out of all proportion to its small number of adherents. Its leading light, Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), wrote Judaism as Civilization (1934), which
offered a non-supernatural conception of the Jewish religion with no need for the God of the Bible, and which provoked charges of heresy and atheism; in his later writings, his “transnatural” idea of the divine was also influenced by the Holocaust in relation to what he regarded as the insurmountable problem of evil.

The second context, that of the problem of evil, is memorably related to the so-called “Death of God” movement, although it might have been better described as “the Death of the traditional conception of God” movement. This emerged in the 1960s and sought to move away from allegedly dated, obsolete ways of thinking about the divine; it was associated with Christians such as Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul van Buren, although it involved some Jewish thinkers, too, all of whom were branded as atheists in the popular press. One context in which the issues were played out was the niche academic discourse of Holocaust Theology. Characterised by anti-theodic, protest theologies against God’s apparent failure to rescue or redeem His People, some Holocaust theologians pressed further to invoke a death-of-God thesis. The classic of the genre was the book by the Jewish iconoclast and radical Richard Rubenstein (1924–), entitled *After Auschwitz* (1966), which proclaimed that the omnipotent, redemptive God of Judaism was dead and the Jewish people stood in “a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power.” He had come to this conclusion following an interview with a prominent Christian clergyman. As he recalled:

> I shall never forget my interview with Heinrich Grüber, Dean of the Evangelical Church of East and West Berlin. He dramatized the consequences of accepting the normative Judaeo-Christian theology of history in the light of the death camps. After my interview, I reached a theological point of no return – If I believed in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama and Israel as His Chosen People, I had to accept Dean Grüber’s conclusion that it was God’s will that Hitler committed six million Jews to slaughter. I could not possibly believe in such a God. (*After Auschwitz*, 46)

Rubenstein went on to argue that dangerous mythic elements within both Judaism (the idea of the Jews as the Chosen People) and Christianity (the idea of the Jews as the deicides or murderers of God) needed to be challenged and rejected. In this context, other Jewish theologians who rejected the all-powerful, redemptive God of the Bible in the face of the Holocaust, and also the idea of divine personhood itself, included Arthur Cohen, Hans Jonas, and Melissa Raphael. The most prominent Christian counterpart who engaged heavily with Holocaust Theology was the aforementioned Paul van Buren (1924–1998). His three-volume work entitled *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (1980–88) attempted a radical reformulation of Christianity’s fundamental beliefs. Van Buren began with the genocidal myth that God’s covenant with the Jews was over, a myth that had generated enormous Jewish suffering over the millennia. Drawing on the 20th-cent. Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, he argued that Jesus’ words in John 14:6 (“No-one comes to the Father except through me”) did not apply to the Jews, since they were already with the Father, so to speak. But his conception of God was highly abstract, as one can see in his reformulation of the nature of revelation, which he defined in purely naturalistic terms – it was about changing human beliefs in God rather than about learning the will of a personal deity who actually acted in history.
Revelation was an intellectual and cultural process occasioned by events that challenged received tradition and which, after re-orientating the community and its direction in history, became part of tradition in their turn. Although he disagreed with Rubenstein on many points, van Buren agreed that the death of the God of Judeo-Christian tradition and the normalization of the Jews without reference to a divine plan were vital for the future of their respective faith communities. But to their many critics, these “Death of God” proponents effectively espoused atheism.

Finally, there are more recent developments with interesting implications for thinking about atheism and scepticism. Today’s Westernized secular world makes concrete and unavoidable certain questions that have emerged since the Enlightenment and later – for both Jews and Christians – of how to think about the phenomenon of Jews and Christians who are not defined religiously, such as non-Jewish Jews and cultural Christians who are, to all intents and purposes, practical if not philosophical atheists. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and many Jewish Zionists before then, and modern Israelis later, would regard themselves as atheists or, as modern Hebrew would have it, as chiloni’im or “secularists” derived from chol or “profane”; while such a term does not equate precisely with the term “atheist” it does suggest how Jews familiar with traditional texts and Hebrew language might associate or contextualise the English “atheism” in a negative way. Likewise, the well-known “new atheism” movement championed by journalist Christopher Hitchens, philosopher Daniel Dennett, biologist Richard Dawkins, and philosopher-scientist Sam Harris, has offended both liberal Christians for attributing to them supernaturalistic beliefs which they do not hold and conservative Christians who tend to adhere dogmatically to, and define their churches around, credal, often supernaturalist conceptions of faith. In contrast, militant atheism has had little effect upon the wider Jewish communities whose traditionalist members remain insular and oblivious, while all others, including non-religious Jews, would claim that, historically speaking, Jews have never defined themselves as only a religion.

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