

# Atheists

Atheism (from Greek ἄθεος, meaning 'without God') is the critique and denial of the existence of God or gods of any kind. The right *not* to believe is protected by international law as a fundamental right to freedom of thought and conscience. Therefore atheists have the right to express their beliefs and criticise religious doctrines and practices as much as those who profess a religion.

Atheism has existed in some form throughout the history of philosophy and religion. In European history, it has been particularly associated with humanist and anticlerical movements originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rise of modern science has also been credited with the rise of atheism. The publication of Charles Darwin's, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859 was a defining moment in this regard. It challenged religion-based assumptions about the beginning of the universe and established evolutionism as the foundation for modern biology. Moreover, it became more widely acceptable to conceive a world without God at its centre, or even a world without God at all.

The perception that atheism has triumphed in Europe and America has fuelled anti-Western sentiment in some countries that have a strong legacy of theistic religion. The consolidation of secular democracies, where freedom, equality, and reason have become primary values of society - as opposed to theocratic models - has also led to confrontations between conflicting worldviews.

Paradoxically, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of atheists and sceptics in these same countries, as rigid doctrines and religion-based violence have soured public opinion on religions and their institutions.

Since the early 2000s, a social movement known as New Atheism has grown considerably, although actual numbers are difficult to establish. New Atheism has been promoted by popular writers like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, who submit that any notion of God is inconsistent with the standard methods of science. Unlike earlier versions of atheism that were more tolerant of religion, proponents of New Atheism tend to view religion as having a dangerous effect on human societies.

## Teachings

One could be tempted to reduce all of atheism to a simple denial of the existence of God; in reality, there are many expressions of atheism and related belief systems, such as agnosticism, scepticism, rationalism, naturalism, positivism, and atheistic humanism. Even still, there are some common principles to which most atheists adhere. For instance, atheists tend to value free and critical thinking. They may regard scientific enquiry as the only vehicle for determining truth.

Atheists may also appeal to the apparent incompatibility between belief in an all-powerful and benevolent god and a world full of evil and suffering. In theology, the attempt to establish a framework which reconciles the existence of God with apparent evil is known as *theodicy*. However, many atheists argue that theodicy, indeed religion itself, has developed in response to a need for congruity and social order. Belief in God cannot be reached logically and is, therefore, to be rejected by all thinking people.

## Controversies

Atheists suffer a wide range of penalties and discrimination in several countries today. Restrictive laws can limit atheists from enjoying fundamental freedoms, such as the right to citizenship, the right to be married, the ability to access public education, or to hold public office. The public expression of atheistic views toward religion can also be criminalised. Laws on blasphemy and apostasy, even the crime of ‘offending religious feelings,’ can draw severe penalties, even prison or death.

The perverse effect of such laws is often manifested in the form of societal prejudice, stigmatisation, and discrimination against atheists. These practices are legitimised by the state's preference for a particular religion and the relegation of its non-religious citizens to 'second-class' status. For example, in **Egypt** the state only recognises Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as belief systems, and Islamic Sharia is constitutionally affirmed as ‘the principle source of legislation.’ Together with anti-blasphemy legislation, these laws have created a culture of discrimination against anyone who does not adhere to one of the three Abrahamic faiths. The non-religious are particularly marginalised and even targeted.

Similarly, **Indonesia**'s constitution stipulates that the state ‘shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God’ (Article 29). As a consequence, the authorities do not recognise the existence of the non-religious. Indonesian identity cards must declare one's affiliation to one of six officially recognised religions. Expressing support for atheism is effectively banned by the blasphemy law under the country's penal code, carrying a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Analogous restrictions on atheists exist in **Pakistan** and **Saudi Arabia**. Atheists can also face severe discrimination in **Eritrea, Iran, Tunisia, and several other countries**.

The reasons for such legal and social constraints on atheism are complex. Atheism has been associated with extremist ideology, terrorism, and its proliferation is seen as a threat to the state and society. This position is buttressed by legal structures which state authorities fear changing, even if they believe that reforms of the law are necessary. Any dissenting voice is quickly suppressed by conservative religious leaders and scholars. A complex and intertwining system of various interests has a fossilising effect on any motivation for change.

In terms of national security, an atheist may be viewed not only as an enemy of God but of the state as well. From this perspective, the linkage between politics and religion is particularly

relevant for understanding the motivations behind the repression of atheism. In states where religion is leveraged as a source of legitimacy, the denial of religion can be seen as undermining the government's right to exist.

Finally, atheism can be viewed by political leaders as a colonial and western intrusion which may have a negative impact on the fabric of their society and upcoming generations. This phenomenon has been compounded by the advent of newer communication technologies that provide easy access to information on western values and customs, introducing people to more free and open societies. Many countries are struggling not only with the freedom of religion and conscience but also with the concept of freedom in general. The culture of dialogue, tolerance, and debate is not universally understood or, at least, not understood in the same way. Therefore, atheists who express a non-traditional viewpoint on the religious heritage of their country become particularly vulnerable.

## **Atheists in Prison**

In the last few years, atheists (or perceived atheists) and agnostics have been jailed in a number of Muslim countries, such as **Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia**, for publicly professing their worldview. Keeping a low profile and avoiding manifestation of their beliefs is the only way they can avoid prison.

### **Egypt**

After his arrest in November 2014 in a so-called 'atheist café,' **Karim Ashraf Mohammed Al-Banna**, a student, was kept in custody until his trial on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2015. The Idku District Misdemeanor Court (Delta governorate of Beheira) then handed down a three-year prison sentence for contempt of Islam and insulting the divine but allowed Al-Banna a bail of EGP 1,000 (USD 140) to suspend the prison time.

In December 2014, a wing of the justice ministry that issues religious edicts released a survey claiming that Egypt was home to 866 atheists.

From 2011 to 2013, Egyptian courts convicted 27 of 42 defendants on charges of contempt for religion.

In June 2014, an appeals court upheld a five-year sentence handed down in absentia to **Karam Saber** for his short story collection entitled "Where is God?"

In December 2012, a 27-year-old blogger, **Alber Saber**, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of blasphemy for creating a web page called 'Egyptian atheists.'

## **Conclusions**

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief – including the right not to believe – is at

the core of any democratic society and is protected by international binding instruments. Even still, atheists face discrimination and repression in various spheres of civil, public and private life. Whatever one thinks of atheistic ideologies, any movement that promotes the peaceful exchange of ideas through dialogue and debate should be welcomed and defended. Such exchanges are a means to avoid the violence and social hostilities that can poison any society and impede its development.

Moreover, when religion is used as a tool to legitimise power and control, the result is often authoritarian rule that loses legitimacy and ultimately the support of its people. Obliging any people to adhere to prescribed national religions or ideologies without the possibility of putting them into question or expressing alternative views does not guarantee a nation's security. Societies that are not free are correspondingly not secure. And to rule through fear is the very antithesis of democracy.

It is clear that the freedom of belief and expression applies equally to people who profess no religion as it does to those who are religious. These are fundamental rights which must be defended and protected in real terms. This is true for domestic policies as well as external policies that impact relations with third countries.