

# ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, AND HUMANISTS

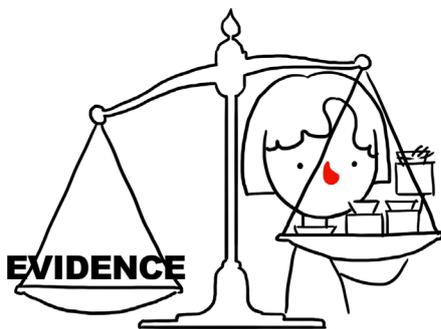
**Theist** = somebody who believes in a god

**Atheist** = somebody who does not believe in a god

**Agnostic** = somebody who says that we cannot know whether a god exists or not

**Ancient Greek origins:** The words 'atheist' and 'agnostic' have their origins in ancient Greek.

- 'Theos' means god
- 'Atheos' means without god
- 'Gnosis' means knowledge
- 'Agnosis' means without knowledge



Many **atheists** accept that they can't **prove** that there is no god, but they see no persuasive **reason** or **evidence** to believe in one.

'What matters is not whether god is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is probable.'

**RICHARD DAWKINS**



Some people describe themselves as atheist *and* agnostic. They accept we cannot **know** for certain whether a god exists or not, but they live their lives without **believing** in one.

## GNOSTIC

THEIST

I believe in a god and am certain one exists.

## AGNOSTIC

I can't say for certain whether a god exists or not but I believe in one.

ATHEIST

I don't believe in a god and am certain no gods exist.

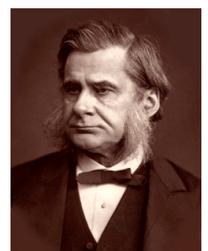
I can't say for certain whether a god exists or not but I don't believe in one.

The word '**agnostic**' is sometimes used to describe someone who cannot decide whether or not they believe a god exists. Some agnostics, in this sense, may not have really thought about the question. Others may have considered it a great deal but see no persuasive reason to decide either way.

However, 'agnostic' also has a different meaning (the original meaning of the word) – someone who claims it is not possible to know whether or not a god exists.

'Agnosticism as a term is not quite as vague and non-committal as generally thought – it is belief that one cannot have certain knowledge about things for which there can be no evidence.'

**THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY,**  
(1825 – 1895)



This does not mean that agnostics are saying that there is no answer to the question of whether or not a god exists. Either a god exists or one does not. They are just saying that we cannot be certain of the answer.

'I can't know whether the gods exist or not, nor what they are like if they do. Two things in particular prevent any certain knowledge – the topic is obscure and life is short.'

**PROTAGORAS,** (5th century BCE)

'For me, humanism is sort of atheism plus.'



**NAOMI PHILLIPS,**  
humanist

## HUMANISTS

If all you know is that someone is an atheist or an agnostic, that does not tell you a great deal about how they live their life.

Many (but not all) atheists and agnostics will have a **humanist** approach to life. Humanists are non-religious people who may use the word 'atheist' or 'agnostic' (or both) to describe themselves. However, being a humanist means more than this. Humanists believe we can understand the world through science. They believe we should treat each other with kindness and respect. They believe it is possible to lead good, happy, and meaningful lives without the need to believe in a god.

“Humanism for me has always been positive. We don't define ourselves by what we don't believe, which is what I had always done prior to discovering humanism as an atheist. The fact that logic and rational thinking are so prized, alongside empathy and human feeling, really attracts me to the humanist philosophy.”



**STE RICHARDSSON,** humanist



**RICHARD NORMAN,**  
humanist philosopher

'Humanist agnostics would say that, if we cannot know that there is a god, it makes sense to live without relying on any belief in a deity.'

## HOW MANY ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS ARE THERE?

The 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey<sup>1</sup> revealed that 45% of the population of Britain are atheist or agnostic. Over 70% of those who describe themselves as 'non-religious' are atheist or agnostic. However, so are 10-20% of those who identify as 'religious' (e.g. Jewish or Christian). These people may feel a sense of belonging to a religion for family or cultural reasons, they may follow religious practices and celebrate religious festivals, but they do not believe in a god.

“I am an atheist, and this confuses some people... For me, Jewishness, and I would say for an awful lot of Jews, is nothing to do with believing in God... For me, Jew is an identity. It's an ethnic and cultural identity, which I feel very strongly... My Jewish identity is to do with food, and comedy, and family, and literature, and a way of being, and, incredibly importantly, anti-semitism.”

**DAVID BADDIEL,**  
patron of Humanists UK



Credit: Amnesty International

“My robust agnosticism is informed by my socially liberal Hindu parents... I consider myself a non-practicing Hindu... I consider myself a Hindu, by identity rather than belief system.”

**PAUL SINHA,**  
patron of Humanists UK



<sup>1</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen (2018): [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1\\_bsa36\\_religion.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf)



## QUESTIONS

- Why might somebody describe themselves as an atheist and an agnostic?
- What is a humanist?
- Is it possible to be religious and atheist?
- Do you believe it is possible to be certain about your belief, or non-belief, in a god or gods?
- Do you think it matters whether you believe in a god or not? Is how you live your life more important?