

WHY ATHEISTS DON'T BELIEVE IN A GOD

REASONS TO BELIEVE... OR NOT?

People give different reasons why they believe in a god. Some are below:

1. I hear god's voice – he speaks to me.
2. My holy book tells me god exists.
3. My parents told me god exists and I believe them.
4. Lots of people believe in a god so he must exist.
5. I have faith that god exists.
6. There are too many things we can't explain without a god.

These are not the only reasons people believe in a god, but atheists do not think that any of the arguments put forward for the existence of a god provide persuasive enough evidence to believe.



'The Bible is a human product. Religion is a human construct.'

FRANCESCA STAVRAKOPOULOU, biblical scholar

'After a lot of reading, and research, I realized, I didn't have any secret channel picking up secret messages from god or anyone else. That voice in my head was my own.'

GREYDON SQUARE, rapper



'How many times have I told you not to believe everything you hear? Seek truth for yourself.'

ISABELLE ALLENDE, author

'Where there is evidence, no one speaks of 'faith'. We do not speak of faith that two and two are four or that the earth is round. We only speak of faith when we wish to substitute emotion for evidence.'

BERTRAND RUSSELL, philosopher



HOW MIGHT AN ATHEIST RESPOND TO EACH OF THESE REASONS TO BELIEVE?

1. The 'religious experience' of '**hearing god's voice**' could be what many other people describe as their conscience. There is no evidence that this voice comes from anywhere outside of us. We should look for a natural explanation.
2. **Holy books** are written by human beings. Their stories can often support us to think about human nature, but there is no reason to believe everything in them is true (many of their claims have turned out to be false). And why should we trust one holy book over the others?
3. We can learn lots from **other people**, but other people can also sometimes be mistaken. People don't always tell the truth (sometimes for what they think are good reasons). We need to think for ourselves.
4. The fact that **lots of people believe** something doesn't necessarily make it true. Many people in the past thought that the Sun moved across the sky, but we now know they were wrong. Instead it is the Earth that is rotating. Also, lots of people believe in different gods. They can't all be right. And many people don't believe in a god at all.
5. **Faith** is not a reliable enough reason to believe. Believing or wanting something to be true does not make it true. We should always look for evidence.
6. The fact that we can't answer all our questions does not mean that we won't be able to answer them in the future. There were many things we did not used to be able to **explain** but we now can, thanks to science. There may be questions science will never answer, but that is not a reason to turn to religious explanations.



QUESTION:

• What do you think about the atheist responses?

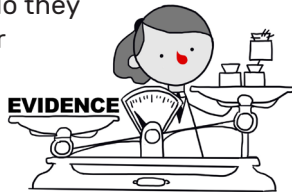
WHY MIGHT SOMEBODY NOT BELIEVE IN A GOD?

'We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.'



RICHARD DAWKINS,
scientist

The most simple reason why somebody might not believe in a god is that he or she doesn't see any persuasive **reason** or **evidence** to believe. They don't feel the need to believe in a god to explain the world around them. Nor do they believe a god is necessary for human beings to lead good, happy, and meaningful lives.



Atheists are sceptical of the explanations religious people might give as reasons to believe in a god. These might include faith, revelation (religious experiences), scripture, or the guidance of figures of authority. Atheists don't find that any of these provide persuasive evidence. They don't believe that there is good evidence that prayer makes a difference to the world (other than that it may be of emotional support to the person praying). They don't believe in 'miracles' – they believe either these events have a natural explanation or they simply didn't happen. Philosophers and theologians have developed many arguments over the centuries for the existence of a god. However, none have succeeded in producing a conclusive argument and atheists do not find them persuasive.

What many atheists do think there is good evidence for is an enormous amount of pain and **suffering** in the world. For many, this provides a good reason to doubt the existence of an omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and benevolent (all-good) god. If such a god knows suffering exists, can prevent it, and is good, then why would he or she let it happen? Religious believers have attempted to answer this question, but many atheists believe that the simplest answer is to conclude that there is no god.



QUESTION:

- Do you think atheists have good reasons for not believing in a god?

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

Sometimes people are critical of atheists. They argue that atheists cannot prove there is no god. They say not believing is a faith position, just like believing is. Many atheists, however, would argue that, if there is no persuasive evidence that something exists, then the rational position is to not believe. The absence of conclusive proof either way should not force one to remain neutral. There are many other things we can't prove don't exist but we think it is perfectly rational not to believe in them. Many atheists believe that the responsibility should rest on the believer to provide good evidence that something exists, not on the non-believer to prove that it doesn't. This is because it is impossible to prove that something does not exist.

'Even though there's no scientific evidence at all for God's existence, it's also impossible to prove that God doesn't exist (or that anything doesn't).'

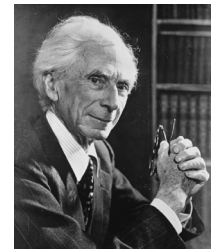


ARIANE SHERINE,
writer and Patron of Humanists UK

“Atheists do not believe in God because they see no good evidence that such a deity exists. This falls short of full proof but it is fundamentally an evidence-based position.”

JULIAN BAGGINI, humanist philosopher

The philosopher Bertrand Russell proposed a thought experiment to illustrate the burden of proof. Imagine you were told there was a teapot floating in space and orbiting the sun on the same path as the Earth. Imagine you were then told that this teapot was always located on exactly the opposite side of the sun from the Earth so that we would never be able to detect it with our telescopes or in any other way. It would be impossible to prove that the teapot did not exist, but many people believe it would be perfectly reasonable to doubt it and to be sceptical of any claims it existed without good evidence.



HOW MIGHT ATHEISTS EXPLAIN PEOPLE'S BELIEFS IN GODS?

Why do many people believe in a god or gods? Philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists have suggested a number of explanations.

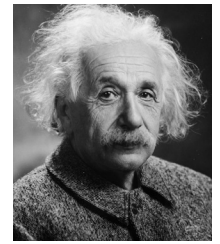
1. In the past, a belief in a god or gods helped us to explain the natural world and our internal mental experiences.
2. It is possible that many people are hardwired to believe – it is an instinct that has evolved naturally.
3. Human beings are creatures that search for meaning – religious beliefs have provided answers and comfort for many people.
4. There can be social pressures to believe: parents pass on their beliefs, people want to fit in with the rest of society, in some parts of the world it can be dangerous to disagree.

In the past, without our modern **scientific knowledge** of the natural world, it would have been difficult to explain why the sun rose and set, why natural disasters occurred, or why people became ill. Before Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, the apparent design and complexity of the human body and the suitability of animals to their environments persuaded many people of the existence of a creator. Many 'religious experiences' would also have been hard to explain. However, our modern understanding of human psychology and neuroscience is making it easier to understand where such experiences come from. Scientists have even managed to trigger 'religious experiences' in experiments by stimulating particular parts of the brain.

Some people say that there is still a space left for a god to explain that which science has not yet answered. Many atheists would say that this kind of a god is a **'god of the gaps'**, a placeholder for what we do not yet know, and we should continue to look for natural explanations. There may be questions that science can't answer. However, we have other tools such as philosophy, literature, the arts, and human experience to address such questions – atheists believe we do not need to turn to religion.

“It was the experience of mystery, even if mixed with fear, that engendered religion.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN



Human beings appear to have a natural desire to seek **meaning and purpose** (even when there might be none). It gives some people a sense of comfort to feel they will live on after they die and that their lives are part of a bigger plan. Many atheists believe that we can find meaning and comfort without religious beliefs.

The scientist Richard Dawkins speaks of our seeing the world through 'purpose coloured spectacles'. Because we design things for a purpose ourselves we feel that we and the world around us must also have been designed for some purpose. However, science has revealed that we are the result of evolution by natural selection – a natural process without purpose.

Human beings often find patterns in meaningless noise (e.g. we see faces when none are really there) and we believe intentional agents are behind natural events (e.g. supernatural forces that cause good or bad luck).

Skeptic and science writer Michael Shermer uses the terms 'patternicity' and 'agenticity' to explain why we evolved the feeling that there might be a purpose to events when there is none. If our ancestors heard a rustling in the bushes, it was safest to imagine it was a tiger rather than the wind. If you guessed it was a tiger and you were wrong, no problem. If you guessed it was the wind and you were wrong, you were lunch!



We may have natural instincts to believe in gods but there are also very powerful **social reasons** – the influence of one’s parents, peers, and society. Organised religion, in many countries, plays a powerful role in the running of the state, particularly in education. In some countries, being an atheist is punishable by imprisonment, or even death.

Society is, however, changing. Today people are less likely to follow the beliefs of their parents. Many atheists believe that if we can remove any privileged role for religion in society then we can be more confident that our beliefs stem from our own free thought.

CREATED IN GOD’S IMAGE?



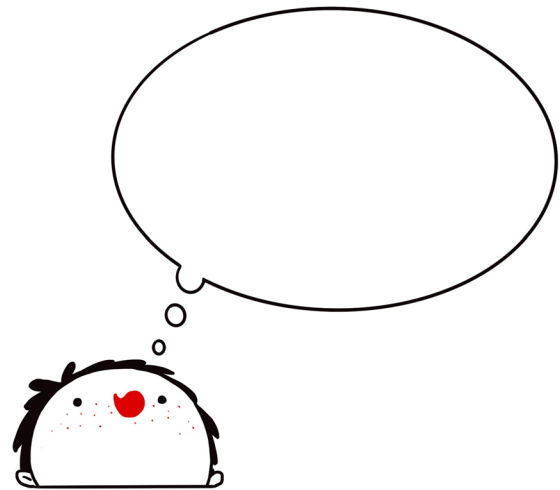
ISAAC ASIMOV,
author

‘It seems to me that God is a convenient invention of the human mind.’

Many atheists believe that gods are a human invention rather than the other way round. God didn’t create us in his image, but we created gods in ours.

‘It’s interesting that old gods look so much like the human beings that made them. Desert dwellers invented harsh and dry austere gods. Farmers invented gods of harvest and plenty. It’s also true of individuals today: there are no liberals who believe in a conservative god, or vice versa. Kind people believe in kind gods, and cruel people in cruel ones.’

ANDREW COPSON,
Little Book of Humanism



The idea that gods are a human invention is not new:



‘The Ethiopians say that the gods have flat noses and are black, while the Thracians say that the gods have blue eyes and red hair... And if cattle or horses or lions had hands or could draw or sculpt like men can, then the horses would draw their gods like horses, cattle draw their gods like cattle, and both would depict the bodies of the gods in their own likeness.’

XENOPHANES, (570 – 475 BC)

The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said god is a human creation. The idea of god is really just ourselves, our own thoughts and values projected onto the idea of something external to ourselves. What people think of as god is in fact our own human nature.

‘You believe in love as a divine attribute because you yourself love, and believe that God is a wise and benevolent being because you know nothing better in yourself than wisdom and benevolence.’



LUDWIG FEUERBACH,
(1804 – 1872)