

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Not Believing is the Second Biggest "Belief" in the U.S.

JONNY THOMSON

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There are different types of atheism and atheists. In general, they can be classified as the non-religious, the non-believers, and agnostics.



Credit: "The Holy Trinity" by Andrés López / Wikipedia Commons

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are over a billion people worldwide who are not religious. It is the second biggest "belief" in the U.S.
- Not all atheists are the same. Broadly, they can be divided into the non-religious, the non-believers, and the agnostic.
- Getting to know what someone disbelieves and why is a great way to understand them.

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It is widely thought that there are roughly 10,000 religions in the world, today. Most of us are familiar with the big ones — Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on — but hundreds of millions believe in folk, traditional, or tribal faiths, too.

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Theologians, anthropologists, and sociologists are very good at classifying religions. People devote their entire lives to delineating between the tiniest, most esoteric of differences. Iconography, creed, ritual, worship, prayer, and community serve to draw the borders between these faiths.

But this misses something. Outside of the churches, mosques, temples, and pagodas is a shifting, enigmatic, indefinable mass: the group of people who belong to some type of atheism. It is no small fringe, either. Over a billion people do not follow a religion. They make up [roughly a quarter of the U.S. population](#), making it the second largest “belief.” [Roughly 60% of the UK](#) never go to church, and there are now more [atheists than believers in Norway](#).

Notably, not all atheism is the same. The various types of atheism deserve greater examination.

The types of atheism

The problem is that these statistics do not tell a full story. The term “non-religious” is so broad as to be almost meaningless. The words secular, agnostic, atheistic, humanistic, irreligious, or non-religious are not synonyms. This is not some nit-picky pedantry. For the billion plus people in the world who are one particular type of atheist, the difference matters.

It is no easy task to delineate these belief systems, not least because a vast number of them balk at being defined as “believers” at all. Some suggest it is better to describe non-religion as a scale (such as the 1-7 “[likelihood of God](#)” scale Richard Dawkins suggests in *The God Delusion*). But this, too, puts the cart before the horse. Not all religion is about probability, certainty, or assent to various truth claims.

Broadly speaking, atheists can come in three varieties: the nonreligious, the nonbelievers, and the agnostic. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and the types of atheism often overlap.

The nonreligious

The first type of atheism means not subscribing to one of the big, traditional religions.

Consider China. It is a country, on first glance, that is hugely irreligious: [91% of Chinese adults can be called atheist](#). But so much of this data, as in most demographic surveys, hinges on “self-identification” by respondents. The issue is that most people in the world today will understand religion in a particular way. They see it as being the formal creeds

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or practices of the established, organized religions. It means going to church, praying five times a day, or believing the Four Noble Truths. But religion is much broader than that.

In the case of China, while 91% claim to be “atheist,” [70 percent of the adult population practices ancestor worship](#). Twelve percent self-identify with [some folk belief](#), and the vast majority practice the pseudoscientific, quasi-religious [“traditional medicine.”](#)

For a lot of people, “atheism” means not believing in this or that *formal* religion. For others, the word might bear closer resemblance to its etymology, in which “a-theism” means anti-*theistic* belief (allowing Buddhism, for instance). Many in this category we might describe as “mystics” — that is, they do not think any image or idea of God(s) is right, but they feel that there is some kind of spiritual reality.

It is a curiosity seen all over the world. An “atheist” might also believe in angels, fairies, karma, a divine plan, a soul, ghosts, spirits, or Ouija boards. None of these, alone, make up an organized belief, but they are beliefs of a sort.

The nonbelievers

The second type of atheism is one which argues against or rejects certain belief statements.

These atheists will define religion ([rightly or wrongly](#)) as being a set of creeds, beliefs, and quasi-factual statements that they call false. It is the type of atheism that most are familiar with, and it is often the type which most often pops up on internet message boards.

These atheists will say “Jesus rose from the dead,” “Yogic flying is possible”, or, “The Angel Jibril spoke to Muhammed” are all statements that can be disproven or should be disbelieved. They are facts to corroborate or dismiss. Modern atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, and older ones like [David Hume](#) or John Stuart Mill, belong to this kind. They point out what they perceive to be the inaccuracies, contradictions, or absurdities of what religion teaches.

The “nonbeliever” type of atheism will often attack the *values* of a religion or even the religious themselves. They claim that religion is what leads to intolerance, prejudice, racism, misogyny, genocide, violence, cruelty, superstition, ignorance, and so on, so it must be rejected out of hand.

The agnostic

The third type of atheism is non-committal. It’s called agnosticism.

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If we define atheism as a belief statement — namely, “I am 100% sure God(s) do(es) not exist” — then there are very few atheists. A lot of the “nonbeliever” types concern themselves with probabilities and verifying belief-claims. But, with many of religion’s claims being supernatural, it is impossible to rule them out entirely.

Humans are physical beings, with fallible senses and variable intelligence. As such, very few people will claim *certainty* about the metaphysical and infinite. A lot of those who call themselves atheist are actually agnostic. They might be those who think religion is very, very unlikely to be right (as Dawkins does) or who accept that there is some varying degree of possibility. Others might [suspend judgment](#) — there is no (accessible) data either way, so why commit?

As William James argues in his essay “The Will to Believe,” agnosticism of this kind (or “skepticism” as he prefers) is tantamount to atheism. If we go about our days without consideration of religion, without living the life of the believer, then it is “as if we positively chose to disbelieve.” The difference between agnostics and atheists is simply an epistemological one. For both, religion simply is not important.

Learning to talk about disbelief

Talking about belief (or the lack thereof) is something we could all be better at. [Half of U.S. adults “seldom or never”](#) talk about religion with people outside their family. In the UK, former spin doctor for Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, once said, “[we don’t do God](#)”. His point was that religion is a personal (and often unpalatable and awkward) conversation topic for most British people.

Yet, so much is lost in the process. Our beliefs, religious or otherwise, are the most important things about who we are. Sharing and discussing them with others not only helps us understand ourselves more but brings us all closer together. Conflict is often born of misunderstanding and ignorance, and a lot of discord could be avoided by dialogue that seeks to elucidate people’s beliefs.

Examining the types of atheism also reveals another exciting topic: disbelief. All of us have beliefs, but we also all have disbeliefs. Even theists reject the existence of some gods.

Jonny Thomson teaches philosophy in Oxford. He runs a popular Instagram account called Mini Philosophy (@philosophyminis). His first book is [Mini Philosophy: A Small Book of Big Ideas](#).

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