Comparison between Atheism, Agnosticism and Humanism

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the Comparison between Atheism, Agnosticism and Humanism. Atheism is, in the broadest sense, an absence of belief in the existence of deities. Less broadly, atheism is a rejection of the belief that any deities exist. Agnosticism is the view that the existence of God, of the divine or the supernatural is unknown or unknowable. Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition. The words atheist and agnostic conjure up a number of different perceptions and meanings. When it comes to questioning the existence of gods, the subject is a tricky one that is often misunderstood. No matter what their reasons or how they approach the question, agnostics and atheists are fundamentally different, but also non-exclusive.

Keywords: Comparison, Atheism, Agnosticism, Humanism.

INTRODUCTION

Atheism is, in the broadest sense, an absence of belief in the existence of deities. Less broadly, atheism is a rejection of the belief that any deities exist. In an even narrower sense, atheism is specifically the position that there are no deities. Atheism is contrasted with theism, which, in its most general form, is the belief that at least one deity exists. The etymological root for the word atheism originated before the 5th century BCE from the ancient Greek atheos, meaning "without god(s)". In antiquity, it had multiple uses as a pejorative term applied to those thought to reject the gods worshiped by the larger society, those who were forsaken by the gods, or those who had no commitment to belief in the gods. The term denoted a social category created by orthodox religionists into which those who did not share their religious beliefs were placed. The actual term atheism emerged first in the 16th century. With the spread of freethought, skeptical inquiry, and subsequent increase in criticism of religion, application of the term narrowed in scope. The first individuals to identify themselves using the word atheist lived in the 18th century during the Age of Enlightenment. The French Revolution, noted for its "unprecedented atheism," witnessed the first major political movement in history to advocate for the supremacy of human reason. Arguments for atheism range from philosophical to social and historical approaches. Rationales for not believing in deities include arguments that there is a lack of empirical evidence, the problem of evil, the argument from inconsistent revelations, the rejection of concepts that cannot be falsified, and the argument from nonbelief. Nonbelievers contend that atheism is a more parsimonious position than theism and that everyone is born without beliefs in deities; therefore, they argue that the burden of proof lies not on the atheist to disprove the existence of gods but on the theist to provide a rationale for theism. [1] Although some atheists have adopted secular philosophies, [3] there is no one ideology or code of conduct to which all atheists adhere. Since conceptions of atheism vary, accurate estimations of
current numbers of atheists are difficult. According to global Win-Gallup International studies, 13% of respondents were "convinced atheists" in 2012, 11% were "convinced atheists" in 2015, and in 2017, 9% were "convinced atheists". However, other researchers have advised caution with WIN/Gallup figures since other surveys which have used the same wording for decades and have a bigger sample size have consistently reached lower figures. An older survey by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2004 recorded atheists as comprising 8% of the world's population. Other older estimates have indicated that atheists comprise 2% of the world's population, while the irreligious add a further 12%. According to these polls, Europe and East Asia are the regions with the highest rates of atheism. In 2015, 61% of people in China reported that they were atheists. The figures for a 2010 Eurobarometer survey in the European Union (EU) reported that 20% of the EU population claimed not to believe in "any sort of spirit, God or life force". Agnosticism is the view that the existence of God, of the divine or the supernatural is unknown or unknowable. Another definition provided is the view that "human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist." The English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley coined the word agnostic in 1869, and said "It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe." Earlier thinkers, however, had written works that promoted agnostic points of view, such as Sanjaya Belatthaputta, a 5th-century BCE Indian philosopher who expressed agnosticism about any afterlife; and Protagoras, a 5th-century BCE Greek philosopher who expressed agnosticism about the existence of "the gods". Agnosticism is the doctrine or tenet of agnostics with regard to the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena or to knowledge of a First Cause or God, and is not a religion. Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition. The meaning of the term humanism has fluctuated according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it. The term was coined by theologian Friedrich Niethammer at the beginning of the 19th century to refer to a system of education based on the study of classical literature ("classical humanism"). Generally, however, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. It views humans as solely responsible for the promotion and development of individuals and emphasizes a concern for man in relation to the world. In modern times, humanist movements are typically non-religious movements aligned with secularism, and today humanism may refer to a nontheistic life stance centred on human agency and looking to science rather than revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world. Brief History of Atheism Western atheism has its roots in pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, but atheism in the modern sense was nonexistent or extremely rare in ancient Greece. Pre-Socratic Atomists such as Democritus attempted to explain the world in a purely materialistic way and interpreted religion as a human reaction to natural phenomena, but did not explicitly deny the gods' existence. Anaxagoras, whom Irenaeus calls "the atheist", was accused of impiety and condemned for stating that "the sun is a type of incandescent stone", an affirmation with which he tried to deny the divinity of the celestial bodies. During the Early Middle Ages, the Islamic world experienced a Golden Age. Along with advances in science and philosophy, Arab and Persian lands produced outspoken rationalists and atheists, including Muhammad al Warraq (fl. 9th century), Ibn al-Rawandi (827–911), Al-Razi (854–925), and Al-Ma’arri (973–1058). Al-Ma’arri wrote and taught that religion itself was a "fable invented
by the ancients” and that humans were “of two sorts: those with brains, but no religion, and those with religion, but no brains.” Despite their being relatively prolific writers, little of their work survives, mainly being preserved through quotations and excerpts in later works by Muslim apologists attempting to refute them [11]. Other prominent Golden Age scholars have been associated with rationalist thought and atheism as well, although the current intellectual atmosphere in the Islamic world, and the scant evidence that survives from the era, make this point a contentious one today [12].

[13] wrote that the Reformation had paved the way for atheists by attacking the authority of the Catholic Church, which in turn “quietly inspired other thinkers to attack the authority of the new Protestant churches”. Deism gained influence in France, Prussia, and England. The philosopher Baruch Spinoza was “probably the first well known 'semi-atheist' to announce himself in a Christian land in the modern era” according to [14].

[15] believed that natural laws explained the workings of the universe. In 1661 he published his Short Treatise on God. Criticism of Christianity became increasingly frequent in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in France and England, where there appears to have been a religious malaise, according to contemporary sources. Some Protestant thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes, espoused a materialist philosophy and skepticism toward supernatural occurrences, while Spinoza rejected divine providence in favor of a panentheistic naturalism. By the late 17th century, deism came to be openly espoused by intellectuals such as John Toland who coined the term "pantheist".

The first known explicit atheist was the German critic of religion Matthias Knutzen in his three writings of 1674. He was followed by two other explicit atheist writers, the Polish ex-Jesuit philosopher Kazimierz Łyszczyński and in the 1720s by the French priest Jean Meslier. In the course of the 18th century, other openly atheistic thinkers followed, such as Baron d'Holbach, Jacques-André Naigeon, and other French materialists. John Locke in contrast, though an advocate of tolerance, urged authorities not to tolerate atheism, believing that the denial of God's existence would undermine the social order and lead to chaos [16].

The philosopher David Hume developed a skeptical epistemology grounded in empiricism, and Immanuel Kant’s philosophy has strongly questioned the very possibility of a metaphysical knowledge. Both philosophers undermined the metaphysical basis of natural theology and criticized classical arguments for the existence of God.

**Brief History of Agnosticism**

Throughout the history of Hinduism there has been a strong tradition of philosophic speculation and skepticism [17]. The Rig Veda takes an agnostic view on the fundamental question of how the universe and the gods were created. Nasadiya Sukta (Creation Hymn) in the tenth chapter of the Rig Veda says:

> But, after all, who knows, and who can say whence it all came, and how creation happened? The gods themselves are later than creation, so who knows truly whence it has arisen? Whence all creation had its origin, He, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not, He, who surveys it all from highest heaven, He knows - or maybe even he does not know.

[18] presented arguments attempting to rationally prove the existence of God. The skeptical empiricism of David Hume, the antinomies of Immanuel Kant, and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard convinced many later philosophers to abandon these attempts, regarding it impossible to construct any unassailable proof for the existence or non-existence of God.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) declared Why I Am Not a Christian in 1927, a classic statement of agnosticism. He calls upon his readers to "stand on their own two feet and look fair and square at the world with a fearless attitude and a free intelligence".
In 1939, Russell gave a lecture on the existence and nature of God, in which he characterized himself as an atheist. He said:

The existence and nature of God is a subject of which I can discuss only half. If one arrives at a negative conclusion concerning the first part of the question, the second part of the question does not arise; and my position, as you may have gathered, is a negative one on this matter.

However, later in the same lecture, discussing modern non-anthropomorphic concepts of God, Russell states:

That sort of God is, I think, not one that can actually be disproved, as I think the omnipotent and benevolent creator can.

Bell believed that there were two other ways that humans could perceive and interact with the world. Artistic experience was how one expressed meaning through speaking, writing, painting, gesturing any sort of communication which shared insight into a human's inner reality. Mystical experience was how one could "read" people and harmonize with them, being what we commonly call love [19]. In summary, man was a scientist, artist, and lover. Without exercising all three, a person became "lopsided." Bell considered a humanist to be a person who cannot rightly ignore the other ways of knowing [20]. However, humanism, like agnosticism, was also temporal, and would eventually lead to either scientific materialism or theism. He lays out the following thesis:

1. Truth cannot be discovered by reasoning on the evidence of scientific data alone. Modern peoples' dissatisfaction with life is the result of depending on such incomplete data. Our ability to reason is not a way to discover Truth but rather a way to organize our knowledge and experiences somewhat sensibly. Without a full, human perception of the world, one's reason tends to lead them in the wrong direction.

2. Beyond what can be measured with scientific tools, there are other types of perception, such as one's ability know another human through loving. One's loves cannot be dissected and logged in a scientific journal, but we know them far better than we know the surface of the sun. They show us an undefinable reality that is nevertheless intimate and personal, and they reveal qualities lovelier and truer than detached facts can provide.

3. To be religious, in the Christian sense, is to live for the Whole of Reality (God) rather than for a small part (gods). Only by treating this Whole of Reality as a person—good and true and perfect—rather than an impersonal force, can we come closer to the Truth. An ultimate Person can be loved, but a cosmic force cannot. A scientist can only discover peripheral truths, but a lover is able to get at the Truth.

4. There are many reasons to believe in God but they are not sufficient for an agnostic to become a theist. It is not enough to believe in an ancient holy book, even though when it is accurately analyzed without bias, it proves to be more trustworthy and admirable than what we are taught in school. Neither is it enough to realize how probable it is that a personal God would have to show human beings how to live, considering they have so much trouble on their own. Nor is it enough to believe for the reason that, throughout history, millions of people have arrived at this Wholeness of Reality only through religious experience. The aforementioned reasons may warm one toward religion, but they fall short of convincing. However, if one presupposes that God is in fact a knowable, loving person, as an experiment, and then lives according that religion, he or she
will suddenly come face to face with experiences previously unknown. One's life becomes full, meaningful, and fearless in the face of death. It does not defy reason but exceeds it.

5. Because God has been experienced through love, the orders of prayer, fellowship, and devotion now matter. They create order within one's life, continually renewing the "missing piece" that had previously felt lost. They empower one to be compassionate and humble, not small-minded or arrogant.

6. No truth should be denied outright, but all should be questioned. Science reveals an ever-growing vision of our universe that should not be discounted due to bias toward older understandings. Reason is to be trusted and cultivated. To believe in God is not to forego reason or to deny scientific facts, but to step into the unknown and discover the fullness of life.

**Brief History of Humanism**

The word "humanism" is ultimately derived from the Latin concept humanitas. It entered English in the nineteenth century. However, historians agree that the concept predates the label invented to describe it, encompassing the various meanings ascribed to humanitas, which included both benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by bonae litterae or humane learning (literally ‘good letters’). Gellius implies that the trained mind is best equipped to handle the problems troubling society.

In 1941, the American Humanist Association was organised. Noted members of the AHA included Isaac Asimov, who was the president from 1985 until his death in 1992, and writer Kurt Vonnegut, who followed as honorary president until his death in 2007. Gore Vidal became honorary president in 2009. Robert Buckman was the head of the association in Canada, and is now an honorary president.

After World War II, three prominent Humanists became the first directors of major divisions of the United Nations: Julian Huxley of UNESCO, Brock Chisholm of the World Health Organization, and John Boyd-Orr of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

In 2004, American Humanist Association, along with other groups representing agnostics, atheists, and other freethinkers, joined to create the Secular Coalition for America which advocates in Washington, D.C., for separation of church and state and nationally for the greater acceptance of nontheistic Americans. The Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for America is Larry T. Decker.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The words atheist and agnostic conjure up a number of different perceptions and meanings. When it comes to questioning the existence of gods, the subject is a tricky one that is often misunderstood. Yet in seeking to restrict the meaning of humanitas to literary education this way, Gellius was not advocating a retreat from political engagement into some ivory tower, though it might look like that to us. He himself was involved in public affairs. According to legal historian Richard Bauman, Gellius was a judge as well as a grammarian and was an active participant the great contemporary debate on harsh punishments that accompanied the legal reforms of Antoninus Pius (one these reforms, for example, was that a prisoner was not to be treated as guilty before being tried). By assigning pride of place to Paideia in his comment on the etymology of humanitas, Gellius implies that the trained mind is best equipped to handle the problems troubling society in 1941, the American Humanist Association was organised. Noted members of The AHA included Isaac Asimov, who was the president from 1985 until his death in 1992, and writer Kurt Vonnegut, who followed as honorary president until his death in 2007. Gore Vidal became honorary president in 2009. Robert Buckman was the head of the association in Canada, and is now an honorary president.[23] After World War II, three prominent Humanists became the first directors of major divisions of the United Nations: Julian Huxley of UNESCO, Brock Chisholm of the World Health Organization, and John Boyd-Orr of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

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simultaneously reject the label of atheist, even if it technically applies to them. In addition, there’s a common misconception that agnosticism is somehow a more “reasonable” position while atheism is more “dogmatic,” ultimately indistinguishable from theism except in the details. This is not a valid argument because it misrepresents or misunderstands everything involved: atheism, theism, agnosticism, and even the nature of belief itself. The difference between being an atheist and an agnostic should be pretty clear and easy to remember. Atheism is about belief or, specifically, what you don’t believe. Agnosticism is about knowledge or, specifically, about what you don’t know. An atheist doesn’t believe in any gods. An agnostic doesn’t know if any gods exist or not. These can be the exact same person, but need not be. In the end, the fact of the matter is that a person is not faced with the necessity of only being either an atheist or an agnostic. Not only can a person be both, but it is, in fact, common for people to be both agnostics and atheists or agnostics and theists. An agnostic atheist won’t claim to know for sure that nothing warranting the label “god” exists or that such cannot exist. And yet, they also don’t actively believe that such an entity does indeed exist.

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