

# Atheism AO1 Handout

## Part 1

### **THE IDEA: The difference between atheism and agnosticism:**

'Atheism' comes from the Greek word meaning "without God" and describes the position of those who reject belief in God or gods. There are various shades of atheism.

The term 'agnostic' was first used by the English biologist Thomas Huxley. The word is derived from the Greek, meaning 'without knowledge'. Agnosticism embraces the idea that the existence of God or any other ultimate reality is, in principle, unknowable. Our knowledge is limited and we cannot know ultimate reasons for things. It is not that the evidence is lacking, it is that the evidence is never possible. Some use the word differently. Agnosticism is commonly used to indicate a suspension of the decision to accept or reject belief in God. The suspension lasts until we have more data.

### **QUOTES**

1. "Atheism is the religion of the autonomous and rational human being, who believes that reason is able to uncover and express the deepest truths of the universe." (Alister McGrath)
2. "I invented the word "agnostic" to denote people who, like myself, confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters about which metaphysicians and theologians dogmatise with utmost confidence." (Thomas Huxley)
3. "They were quite sure that they had attained a certain "gnosis"- had more or less successfully solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble." (Thomas Huxley)
4. "If 'faith' is defined as 'lying beyond proof', both Christianity and atheism are faiths." (Alister McGrath)
5. "Faith is the great cop-out, the excuse to avoid the need to think and to evaluate evidence." (Richard Dawkins)

### **EXAMPLES**

1. Many people are convinced that agnosticism is some sort of "middle way" or "third way" between atheism and theism. But agnosticism is not about belief in God but about knowledge. You can be an agnostic atheist or an agnostic theist. You can believe or disbelieve in a god without being sure.
2. "New Atheism" (antitheism) was coined by Christopher Hitchens. It sees religion as a threat to the survival of the human race. The concept of God is seen as a totalitarian belief that destroys individual freedom.
3. "Protest atheism" is a revolt against God on moral grounds. It is particularly related to the Holocaust.
4. "Positive atheism" is the claim that no God or gods exist. It asserts that you know that God does not exist. The term appears to have been first used in this sense by the philosopher Antony Flew at least as early as 1976.

## Part 2

### THE IDEA: What is meant by New Atheism

**New Atheism** is a term coined by journalists to describe the positions promoted by atheists of the twenty-first century. In pre-2001 usage, one could be an atheist and wish that belief in God was correct. However, the stance of “new atheism” is that the concept of God is seen as a totalitarian belief that destroys individual freedom. Religion is seen as a threat to the survival of the human race.

One of the triggers to this more aggressive approach religious belief was the events of September 11, 2001. Sam Harris was the first of four key atheists to write popular books attacking not just the idea of God but the danger of belief in God. The four writers (Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens) became known as the “Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse”.

With the death of Christopher Hitchens in December 2011, Ayaan Hirsi Ali was seen to take his place and was referred to as the “plus one horse-woman”.

### QUOTE

1. “Faith is the great cop-out, the excuse to avoid the need to think and to evaluate evidence.” (Richard Dawkins)
2. Science is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith.” (Richard Dawkins)
3. “New Atheism” is neither a movement nor new. What is new is the publication of atheist material by big-name publishers, read by millions, and appearing on bestseller lists. (Tom Flynn)
4. “If I had been born in India, I would probably be a Hindu; if in Egypt, probably a Muslim; if in Sri Lanka, probably a Buddhist: but I was born in England and am, predictably, a Christian.” (John Hick)
5. “It is impossible to think of a command without also thinking of the commander.”(John Newman)
6. “Freud’s atheism was the predisposition, not the outcome, of his theories.” (Alister McGrath)
7. “...religion excels all rationalistic systems in that it alone relates to the outer and inner man in equal degree.” (Carl Jung)
8. “Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn’t but even if he was, the bottom line of the Stalin/Hitler debating point is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they do not do evil things in the name of atheism.” (Richard Dawkins)

### EXAMPLE

1. Christopher Hitchens was a proponent of this new atheism. He had referred to it as “antitheism”. Antitheism sees religion as a threat to the survival of the human race. The concept of God is seen as a totalitarian belief that destroys individual freedom.
2. Sam Harris’ book was published in 2004 and became a best seller. It was entitled “The End of faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason.”

3. The Four Horsemen was a reference to the four horsemen from the Book of Revelation.
4. Richard Dawkins is the author of *The God Delusion*, which was preceded by a Channel 4 documentary titled *The Root of all Evil?*
5. Christopher Hitchens was the author of *God is not Great*.
6. The Enlightenment was the period of philosophy in the eighteenth century renowned for its emphasis on reason.
7. Daniel Dennett specialises in philosophy of mind and evolution which he argues explains aspects of consciousness. In 2006 he wrote a best-selling book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon*.
8. Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in Mogadishu in, Somalia. She fled in 1992 to the Netherlands to escape an arranged marriage. Involving herself in Dutch politics she became vocal in opposing Islamic ideology. Fleeing death threats she went to The United States where she now resides.