

HOW TO UNDERSTAND ATHEISM:

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Perhaps a more descriptive and less pretentious title would be “How I Understand Types of Atheism.” Nevertheless, this article began as Footnote 22 in a previous article (Doverspike, 2019, p. 11) in which I defined a few types of atheism. In my own diagnostic classification system of atheists, I differentiate among several different types. My use of the term *diagnosis* is not meant to imply that atheism is a disorder or that atheists are individuals with disorders. My system of taxonomy is not intended to be an assertion of fact or a statement of truth, but rather a conceptual model that I find useful for my own purposes.¹ Several atheistic types are listed below. To some degree, the list is in a hierarchical order ranked by their degree of certainty and conviction of belief (i.e., from lowest to highest), although the astute reader will note deviations from this attempt at organization:

Cowardly atheists are basically agnostics who lack certainty or conviction of belief, neither of which is actually required for someone to be a believer or a **theist**. Most theists—or “believers” as they are more often called—do not always function with absolute certainty. In fact, where there is great faith, there is great doubt.² I have heard and seen support of this hypothesis on the basis of interviews with hundreds of devout and observant clergy, seminarians, and theologians of various

denominations—including Jewish rabbis, Evangelicals, Protestant, and Roman Catholic priests who do not even consider the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church to be a denomination, who have privately shared doubts that would rival the beliefs of the most ardent agnostic. Within this context, I have seen that the antithesis of faith is not doubt—but absolute certainty.

Functional atheists are those who say they believe in God—and they are the ones who often shout it the loudest—yet none of their actions suggest that their beliefs make any difference. This type of atheism might be reflected in governmental currency that is imprinted with the phrase “In God we trust” whereas the government may trust only itself. In fact, the government that circulates such currency may not even trust its legislative, executive, or judicial branches.

Third-grade atheists are characterized by *third-grade atheism*, which is a circular definition that neither defines nor explains anything. Third-grade children are usually in the 8–9 year old range, which is in the middle of the Piagetian *concrete operational* stage (Piaget, 1932, 1948). At this stage, children begin to think in a more logical and organized manner, but their thinking is still very concrete. They begin to use *inductive logic*, which involves reasoning

from specific information to general principles (i.e., from the particular to the general). However, they are not capable of true *deductive logic*, which requires abstract conceptualization, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in reasoning from a general principle to specific information (i.e., from the general to the particular). At this “mythic-literal” stage of faith (Fowler, 1981, p. 135), metaphors and symbolic language are usually understood literally, and deities are almost always anthropomorphic. For example, the child may have the visual image of a deity as an old man with a white beard or a Thor-like warrior who hurls lightning bolts from the sky. If a person continues thinking concretely and literally into young adulthood, then sooner or later the person realizes that these literal superhero figures do not exist; therefore, it follows that God does not exist. (Some adults continue to embrace their childhood image of God, so they are essentially third-grade theists, a topic for another time). Regardless of age, the individual who discards a childhood concept of God and stops without developing a more complex, inclusive, and personalized experience of the transcendent arrives at a theological dead end—a form of *developmental atheism*.

Developmental atheists refer to individuals who becomes fixated, get stuck, or exhibit maladaptive inflexibility at an earlier developmental level of faith, such as Third-grade atheism). From a development perspective, an individual’s

views of God are influenced and shaped by early life experiences, including attachment to caregivers,³ environmental factors, identity formation, and self-perception (Francis et al., 2001; Lawrence, 1997). Developmentally, most adults move into a more “synthetic-conventional” faith (Fowler, 1981, p. 151).⁴ Like their theistic counterparts, the majority of adults remain at this conventional level in most aspects of the practice of their faith. This stage may characterize the majority of individuals who fill traditional houses of worship. Eventually, some individuals transition to a more “individuated-reflective” faith (Fowler, 1981, p. 174) that is more complex, differentiated, and inclusive—regardless of the content of one’s faith. In contrast, third-grade atheists remain fixed at the theological dead end of atheism.

Sophomoric atheists are those whose crisis of faith did not occur when they were college freshmen—or fresh women—but instead it occurs during their second year of college. The precipitating factor to this existential crisis is usually an introductory course in philosophy, psychology, or—God forbid—religion. On the negative side, this transitional time may be a period of angst and struggle. On the positive side, a crisis of confusion may be the precursor to a more differentiated faith, in which atheism represents simply a transient phase signaling the beginning of a new stage of faith development. For this reason, the term “transient atheism” is more often used for individuals who are not in college

during this transition. Whether in college or not—the young adult may be more autonomous and may be taking more personal responsibility for his or her ethical, moral, and religious beliefs, choices, and closely-held values. As individuals become better able to reflect on their own personal beliefs—rather than simply endorsing those of their parents—there is the opportunity for a new complexity of faith. At the same time, this crisis also increases the awareness of conflicts in one's beliefs. By their mid-20s to late 30s, some individuals may have moved into the individuative-reflective stage of faith, in which faith is no longer equated with certainty of belief but also includes doubt.

Devout atheists are also known as Observant atheists who, having given some careful consideration to the matter, are content with their beliefs and content with whatever it is that others believe. They may have a *laissez-faire* “live and let live” approach to life. This type of atheism is not mutually exclusive of other forms of atheism. In other words, some forms of atheism can be co-occurring (e.g., such as Devout atheists and Intellectual atheists).

Intellectual atheists are known by their ability to define, intellectualize, and explain a concept of God in such a way that God does not exist. This type of atheist is characterized by Philosophical atheism, which may represent either a transition stage or a more permanent end-point.

During an atheist quarter in college, I shared my newfound discovery with my philosophy professor, who I assumed was an atheist.⁵ Paraphrasing the English philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (1561–1626), my professor's version for me was as follows: “A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds back to God.”⁶ (My professor shared this wisdom over 50 years ago—before gender neutral language was used—when academic scholars were called men and when God was a male.) Gender differences also play a role in views of God. In contrast to men, women often perceive God as more nurturing, relationship-oriented, and communal than men (Nguyen & Zuckerman, 2016). Many theists, ranging from philosophy professors to liberal theologians to members of twelve-step programs,⁷ learn to define God in ways that allow them to believe (e.g., “in a Power greater than ourselves” or “as we understood Him”). In contrast, intellectual atheists define God in such limited and narrow ways that God does not exist.

Evangelical atheists are those with strong certainty, confidence, and convictions. They like to share—and have others affirm and endorse—their beliefs. They may engage in *atheistic apologetics* (i.e., in which apologetics refers to the religious discipline of defending religious doctrines through systematic argumentation, debate, and discourse). They have certainty of belief, to the extent that they believe their beliefs are

correct, and they may be uncomfortable with ambiguity and doubt. Like their religious fundamentalist counterparts, some evangelicals are characterized by *absolutistic thinking*, which occurs when a person's beliefs, feelings, or opinions are equated with reality. The underlying belief is, "If I think it's so, then it's so." To an absolutist thinker—whether atheistic or theistic—doubt is the antithesis of faith. These atheists are evangelical in the sense that they are enthusiastic about promoting and spreading the "good news" of atheism, but they do not overtly push their agenda.⁸ Although they make attempts to share their beliefs, they are usually respectful in the sense that they do not overtly impose or inflict their beliefs onto others. In this sense, these atheists are "implicit imposers" (Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2005), who do not openly promote their beliefs but instead they deliberately and covertly attempt to convert others to their views. In this context, it may be useful to differentiate between the personality dimensions of introversion and extraversion. Evangelical atheists are often more extraverted, deriving their emotional and psychological energy from outside themselves in the form of reaching out to others. In contrast, *fundamentalist atheists* may be more introverted, recharging from within and therefore being more avoidant, detached, or withdrawn from others. Whereas extraverted imposers may create their own resistance⁹ from others through psychological reactance, introverted imposers may have more stealth in their

approach. When there is a hidden—as opposed to open and explicit—agenda, evangelical atheists can be perceived by others as manipulative in their intentions. In contrast to evangelical atheists, fundamentalist atheists are more likely to be characterized by absolutistic thinking.

Zealous atheists are those whose certainty and convictions are so strong that they cross the line and actively impose their beliefs on others. For this reason, they are often described as "oppositional atheists" (or simply, "oppositional atheists") or, collectively, they may be known as "militant atheists."¹⁰ Whether individually or collectively, they not only stand for themselves but they stand against others who do not share their views. **In one sense, these** people are similar to what Richards and Bergin (1997, 2005) term "explicit imposers" of their values, believing that their beliefs and values are correct and that others would be happier and the world would be a better place if they accept these beliefs. They openly and zealously promote their beliefs while rejecting and emotionally punishing those who do not agree with them. Zealous atheists sometimes become popular in social media, where they often earn more money than preachers at megachurches.¹¹

Atheist, Specified Type is a category that allows for some flexibility for diagnosis. In this instance, the clinician, theologian—or atheologian—can choose to indicate the specific reason that the presentation does

not meet the criteria for any specific type of atheism. “Atheistic, Not Elsewhere Classified (NEC)” is the earlier equivalent of the more contemporary term “Other specified.”

Atheist, Unspecified Type is a category that allows maximum flexibility for diagnosis. In this instance, the clinician, theologian, or atheologian can choose not to specify the reason that the criteria are not met for a specific type of atheism. “Atheist, Not Otherwise Specified (NOS)” is the earlier equivalent of “Unspecified.” Codes titled “unspecified” are for use when the information is insufficient to assign a more specific code.

Christian Theological Considerations

Described as the most influential theologian of the 20th century, Paul Tillich, Ph.D. (1886–1965) was a German-born American Christian existentialist philosopher and theologian. His opposition to the Nazis resulted in his being removed from his professorship in philosophy at the University of Frankfurt in 1933. That same year, he immigrated to the United States, where he taught at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago. One theme in Tillich's writings was what he called "ultimate concern." For Tillich, separate from all cultural and ordinary realities, the object of ultimate concern is understood as being holy, sacred, and numinous. In his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Tillich (1948) refers to God as the "ground of our very being." Tillich (1948, p. 57) writes about God in the following passage:

"The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is GOD. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: 'Life has no depth! Life is shallow. Being itself is surface only.' If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist, but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God." (Tillich, 1948, p. 57)

Jewish Theological Considerations

Debate, dialogue, and disagreement could be described as three sacraments of Judaism. Therefore, it would be grossly inaccurate to state that there is one Jewish view about God. As the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020) expressed the matter, "Jewish faith is not primarily about creeds or theologies; it is not faith thought, but faith lived" (2004, p. 165). Notwithstanding these considerations, in his landmark book, *God is a Verb*, Rabbi David Cooper provides a useful perspective. Rabbi Cooper is a scholar in Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, the study of which was traditionally restricted to qualified men over age 40, because it was believed that only of the most mature could grasp its complexity and depth. In a chapter titled "The Nature of God," Cooper (1997, p. 65) writes the following:

"What is God? In a way, there is no God. Our perception of God usually leads to a misunderstanding that seriously undermines our spiritual development.

God is not what we think It is. God is not a thing, a being, a noun. It does not exist, as existence is defined, for It takes up no space and is not bound by time. Jewish mystics often refer to It as *Ein Sof*, which means Endlessness.

Ein Sof should never be conceptualized in any way. It should not be called Creator, Almighty, Father, Mother, Infinite, the One, Brahma, Buddhamind, Allah, *Adonoy*, *Elohim*, *Eli*, or *Shaddai*; and It should never, never be called He. It is none of these names, and It has no gender.

When we call It God, what are we talking about? If we say that It is compassionate, full of loving kindness, the source of love, we may be

talking about our image of what we think the divine nature ought to be, but we are not talking about *Ein Sof*. In the same way, if we say that the God portrayed in the Bible is vindictive, jealous, angry, cruel, uncaring, or punitive, we cannot be referring to *Ein Sof*. *Ein Sof* includes every attribute but cannot be defined by any of them individually or all of them combined." (Cooper, 1997, p. 65)

Notes

1. It is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013), 1953, *Mathematics Genealogy*, University of London. Described as one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century, Box was a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. Box who wrote the famous line: “All models are wrong, some are useful.” Box appears to have made this statement several times in several ways. Under Section 2.3 (Parsimony) of his 1976 article, Box stated, “Since all models are wrong the scientist cannot obtain a ‘correct’ one by excessive elaboration” (Box, 1976, p. 792). Under Section 2.4 (Worrying Selectively), he wrote, “Since all models are wrong the scientist must be alert to what is importantly wrong” (Box, 1976, p. 792). Box et al. (2009) wrote, “All models are approximations. Assumptions, whether implied or clearly stated, are never exactly true. *All models are wrong, but some models are useful.* So the question you need to ask is not ‘Is the model true?’ (it never is) but “‘Is the model good enough for this particular application?’” (Box, et al., 2009, p. 61). The point that Box consistently made was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly if an answer is correct in all cases.

2. Where there is great faith, there is great doubt. Rev. Dr. Ben Young (2017) provides a discussion of how doubt and uncertainty can deepen faith. Consider some of these spiritual giants across the millennia: St. Peter (d. 64–68), Martin Luther (1483–1546), St. John of the Cross (1542–1591), C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), St. Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), and others. The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. This universal wisdom is expressed in the words of British novelist Robert Harris (2016):

“Let me tell you that the one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Even Christ was not certain at the end. . . . Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there was no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith” (Harris, 2016).

3. Developmental atheism may also have some relationship to *attachment styles* and the *internal working model* that are parts of attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1970). *Attachment styles* are patterns of bonding that people learn as children, originating from the type of care they receive in their earliest years of life. They carry these styles into their adult relationships throughout life. The *internal working model* of attachment is an internalized mental model or template for

future relationships, based largely on an individual's early experiences with the primary caretaker, who acts as a prototype for future relationships. These processes develop and operate outside of one's awareness (Bowby, 1969). *Attachment styles* are expectations—conscious or otherwise—that individuals develop about relationships with other. They involve the extent to which an individual is (1) secure, (2) preoccupied (anxious in children), (3) dismissive (avoidant in children), or (4) fearful (disorganized in children). An individual's attachment style reflects the degree of confidence, security, and trust in the attachment figure's availability to the individual as a safe and secure base from which to explore and navigate in the world. An individual's attachment style predicts how--or even whether--the individual will interact or seek the attachment figure as a safe haven of comfort, support, and protection. Although beyond Bowlby's theory, it is likely that an individual's internal working model and attachment style have implications for one's relationship with the transcendent.

4. In Chapter 2 ("Faith, Religion, and Belief"), Fowler summarizes some ideas from Chapters 6 and 7 of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (1963) book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fowler's lists the following conclusion first:

"Faith, rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is

generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief" (Fowler, 1981, p. 14; italics original).

5. William F. Edwards (1926–1999), Ph.D. Columbia University, was the Undergraduate Director of the Emory University Philosophy Department for more than a decade and a model of an available professor. He was educational, enlightening, and entertaining. I recall one lecture in which Dr. Edwards became so absorbed in thought that he climbed onto his chair and then onto the top of a desk, at which point he seemed surprised that his lecture had achieved such heights as we students were enchanted the whole time. After his retirement, the Department of Philosophy dedicated the annual William F. Edwards Lecture to the undergraduate students to honor his outstanding commitment to undergraduate study.

6. Over the years, I have heard and read several versions of Bacon's (1625/1970) assertion about atheism and philosophy: (1) A little philosophy inclineth a man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth a man's mind back to God. (2) A little philosophy makes men atheists, though a great deal would cure them of Atheism. (3) A little knowledge drives man away from God, but deeper knowledge brings him back. (4) A little knowledge may take us away from God, but further knowledge will bring us back to him. Bacon's (1625, p. 90) actual writing, taken

from a scan of his 1625 book page titled "Of Atheifme. XVI," is rendered as follows:

"It is true, that a little Philofophy inclineth Mans Minde to *Atheisme* ; But depth in Philosophy bringeth Mens Mindes about to *Religion*" (italics, punctuation, spacing, and spelling are original).

7. Among the first 10 members of Alcoholics Anonymous on the East Coast, was James Burwell (1898–1974), who was also known as Jim B. or Jimmy B. He was responsible for starting Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Jim B. was known for preaching his own brand of atheism, which he called "militant agnosticism" and for his strong arguments that the early AA group in New York tone down what he called the "God bit." His most significant contributions to AA included the more inclusive concept of "Higher Power" and "God as we understand Him." After a relapse, Jim B. came to accept the spiritual aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous:

"My brilliant agnosticism vanished, and I saw for the first time that those who really believed, or at least honestly tried to find a Power greater than themselves, were much more composed and contented than I had ever been, and they seemed to have a degree of happiness I had never known." (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 228–229)

8. Lest one commit a microaggression, one must be careful about applying the word *enthusiasm* to evangelical atheists, given that "enthusiasm" originates from the Greek ἐνθουσιασμός from ἐν (en, "in") and θεός

(theós, "god"), meaning "inspired or possessed by [a] god."

9. *Reactance theory* predicts a target behavior will increase if a person's personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966). The implication is that a problem behavior will increase in its frequency, intensity, duration, or context if a person perceives that her personal freedom is being challenged (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). For example, in terms of understanding how nagging and preaching work, reactance theory predicts that nagging or preaching at someone to decrease a problem behavior can exacerbate rather than diminish the problematic behavior. The phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *behavioral reactance* or *psychological resistance*.

10. *Militant atheism* is an informal and loosely-used term in this context. It is not meant to be confused with Michael Burleigh's (2007) more formal description of The League of Militant Atheists. Known by other associations (e.g., Union of the Godless), these atheistic and antireligious organizations of workers and intelligentsia developed in Soviet Russia under influence of the ideological and cultural views and policies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1925 to 1947 (Overy, 2006, p. 271).

11. Zealous atheists and even some Evangelical atheists on the speaking circuits may actually have higher adjusted

gross incomes than preachers at megachurches. However, preachers at megachurches—nondenominational or otherwise—have usually responded to a calling to preach where the benefits package (e.g., health insurance, retirement plan contributions, automobile expenses, and housing allowance) is significant. In contrast to both atheistic and theistic preachers on the speaking circuits, a minister's housing allowance (sometimes called a parsonage allowance or a rental allowance) is excludable from gross income for income tax purposes but not for self-employment tax purposes.

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Rabbi David A. Cooper, who studied mystical Judaism in Jerusalem's Old City for more than eight years, is the author of several books on meditation, spiritual retreats, and Jewish mystical practice. The following is one of the interesting midrashim in Cooper's (1997) book: "Rabbi Zusha of Hanipoli (eighteenth century) was famous for his simple faith. Many stories are told about him, but perhaps the best known relates his response to students who asked why his teachings were different from those of his own teacher. Zusha's answer was, "When I come before the judges of the heavenly tribunal, they are not going to ask if I lived my life like Moses, or if I lived my life like Abraham. They are going to ask me if I lived my life to be the best Zusha I could be" (Cooper, 1997, p. 122).
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Ben Young, D.Min. is a teaching pastor at Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. He is also an adjunct professor at Houston Theological Seminary, and the author of seven books.

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