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Why Johnny Shouldn't Pray

Thousands of years of thoughts regarding religion arranged to free youth from it.

A compendium by Scott J. Durkin

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The Purpose

The real, the deepest, the sole theme of the world and of history, to which all other themes are subordinate, remains the conflict of belief and unbelief.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749-1832)
German philosopher

One would suppose that the battle for religious liberty was won in the United States two hundred years ago. However, in the time since, and right now, powerful voices are always raised in favor of bigotry and thought control. It is useful, then, to have a compendium of the thoughts of great men and women of all faiths (and of none) on the subject, to convince us that we men and women of freedom are not and never have been alone.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer
from Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom
(*parenthetical insert is Asimov's*)

Wisdom begins in wonder.

Socrates
(c. 469-399)
Greek philosopher

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery-- even if mixed with fear -- that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds -- it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
The World as I See It (1934)

To find yourself, think for yourself.

Socrates
(c. 469-399)
Greek philosopher

Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities. The latter cannot understand it when a man does not submit to hereditary prejudices but honestly and courageously uses his intelligence and fulfills the duty to express the results of his thought in clear form.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

Take the risk of thinking for yourself. Much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

The points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins his work are few, and he fills the air with beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine web of his Soul ... Man should not dispute or assert but whisper his results to his neighbor.

John Keats
(1795-1821)
English poet
Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 02/19/1818

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Why Is There Religion?

We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.

Jonathan Swift
(1667-1745)
Irish satirist, Dean of St. Patrick's

You do not need the Bible to justify love, but no better tool has been invented to justify hate.

Richard A. Weatherwax

If we go back to the beginning we shall find that ignorance and fear created the gods, that fancy, enthusiasm, or deceit adorned or disfigured them; that weakness worships them; that credulity preserves them and that custom, respect, and tyranny support them in order to make the blindness of man serve its own interests.

The moralist preaches reason, because he believes it is necessary to man; the philosopher writes, because he believes truth must sooner or later prevail over falsehood; theologians and tyrants necessarily hate truth and despise reason, because they believe them prejudicial to their interests.

Paul Henry Thiry, Baron D'Holbach
(1723-1789)
French philosopher

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot
submitted to Jefferson the original draft of the Declaration of Independence

All religions are equally sublime to the ignorant, useful to the politician, and ridiculous to the philosopher.

Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus)
(c. 99-c. 55)
Roman poet

Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise false, and by the rulers useful.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (the Younger)
(c. 4 BCE -65 ACE)
Spanish-born Roman Statesman, philosopher

It is for the good of states that men should be deluded by religion.

Marcus Terentius Varro
(116-27)
Roman scholar and satirist

Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.

Napoleon Bonaparte
(1769-1821)
Emperor of France

Theology is an attempt to explain a subject by men who do not understand it. The intent is not to tell the truth but to satisfy the questioner.

Elbert Hubbard
(1856-1915)
American writer and publisher

If I were personally to define religion I would say that it is a bandage that man has invented to protect a soul made bloody by circumstance.

Theodore Dreiser
(1871-1945)
American writer

Fanaticism is faith, the essence of faith, active faith, the faith that works miracles. Religion is a relative conception, a thing invented by man- an idea, in sum; the other is a feeling. What has changed on earth is the dogmas, the stories of Vishnu, Ormuzd, Jupiter, Jesus Christ. But what has never changed is the amulet, the sacred springs, the votive offerings, etc., the brahmins, the santons, the hermits- in a word the belief in something superior to life and the need to put one's self under the protection of this force.

Gustave Flaubert
(1821-1880)
French novelist

Religious ideas have sprung from the same need as all the other achievements of culture: from the necessity for defending itself against the crushing supremacy of nature.

Religion is an attempt to get control over the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve its end. Its doctrines carry with them the stamp of the times in which they originated, the ignorant childhood days of the human race. Its consolations deserve no trust . . . If one attempts to assign to religion its place in man's evolution, it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist

Religion is but a desperate attempt to find an escape from the truly dreadful situation in which we find ourselves. Here we are in this wholly fantastic universe with scarcely a clue as to whether our existence has any real significance. No wonder then that many people feel the need for some belief that gives them a sense of security, and no wonder that they become very angry with people like me who say that this is illusory.

Sir Fred Hoyle
(1915-2001)
English astronomer and mathematician
The Nature of the Universe, 1950
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Men are idolaters, and want something to look at and kiss, or throw themselves down before; they always did, they always will; and if you don't make it of wood, you must make it of words.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.
(1841-1935)
U.S. Supreme Court Justice
The Poet at the Breakfast Table (1872),
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.

Angela Carter
(1940-1992)
British author
The Sadeian Woman, "Polemical Preface" (1979)

What gods are there, what gods have there ever been, that were not from man's imagination?

Joseph Campbell
(1904-1987)
American anthropologist
Myths to Live By (1972),
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

It seems obvious to me that the notion of God has never been anything but a kind of ideal projection, a reflection upward of the human personality, and that theology never has been and never can be anything but a more and more purified mythology.

Alfred F. Loisy
(1857-1940)
French Roman Catholic priest
"My Duel with the Vatican"

Fear was the first thing on earth to make gods.

Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus)
(c. 99-c. 55)
Roman poet

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing - fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist The Future of an Illusion

Consider the idea of God. We do not know how it arose in the meme pool. Probably it originated many times by independent 'mutation.' In any case, it is very old indeed. How does it replicate itself? By the spoken and written word, aided by great music and great art. Why does it have such high survival value? Remember that 'survival value' here does not mean value for a gene in a gene pool, but value for a meme in a meme pool. The question really means: What is it about the idea of a god that gives it its stability and

penetrance in the cultural environment? The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The 'everlasting arms' hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
"The Selfish Gene"

I can find no room in my cosmos for a deity save as a waste product of human weakness, the excrement of the imagination.

(George) Norman Douglas
(1868-1952)
English writer
"South Wind" (1917)

Real religion should be something that liberates men. But churches don't want free men who can think for themselves and find their own divinity within. When a religion becomes organized it is no longer a religious experience but only superstition and estrangement.

Federico Fellini
(1920-1993)
Italian film director and scriptwriter
c.1981 60 Minutes interview by Harry Reasoner

Religion is something left over from the infancy of our intelligence, it will fade away as we adopt reason and science as our guidelines.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher

For that again, is what all manner of religion essentially is: childish dependency.

Albert Ellis
(1913-2007)
American psychotherapist

God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent - it says so right here on the label. If you have a mind capable of believing all three of these attributes simultaneously, I have a wonderful bargain for you. No checks, please. Cash and in small bills.

Robert Heinlein
(1907-1988)
American writer
"Notebooks of Lazarus Long"

Religion has convinced people that there's an invisible man ... living in the sky. Who watches everything you do every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a list of ten specific things he doesn't want you to do. And if you do any of these things, he will send you to a special place, of burning and fire and smoke and torture and anguish for you to live forever, and suffer, and suffer, and burn, and scream, until the end of time. But he loves you. He loves you. He loves you and he needs money. All-knowing, all-powerful ... just can't handle money.

George Carlin
(1937-2008)
American satirist

If God has created us in His image, we have more than returned the compliment.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

And it is in his own image, let us remember, that Man creates God.

H. Havelock Ellis
(1859-1939)
British psychologist, writer

We created god in our own image and likeness!

George Carlin
(1937-2008)
American satirist

I distrust people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.

Susan B. Anthony
(1820-1906)
American social reformer

You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.

Anne Lamott
(1954-)
American writer

Religion is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism.

William James
(1842-1910)
American philosopher, psychologist

The Ethiops say that their gods are flat-nosed and black,
While the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.
Yet if cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw,
And could sculpt like men, then the horses would draw their gods
Like horses, and cattle like cattle; and each they would shape
Bodies of gods in the likeness, each kind, of their own.

Xenophanes
(c. 570-c. 475)
Greek philosopher

The gods that we've made are exactly the gods you'd expect to be made by a species that's about half a chromosome away from being chimpanzee.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Superstitions, cults and mysticism appear with surprising consistency during a social crisis. Today it is ESP and UFOs, astrology and clairvoyance, mystic cults and mesmeric healers. The growth of interest in such things is a sure indicator of social unrest, personal uneasiness, frustration and loss of purpose. These symptoms are also present in the West, particularly in the U.S., where they are more chronic; in the Soviet Union, however, we have an acute fever. ...Carl Sagan of Cornell University has told me that in the U.S. there are 15,000 astrologers and only 1,500 astronomers. ...It is fascinating that in the Soviet Union we are importing creationism from fundamentalists in the U.S. ...The momentous changes happening now

in the Soviet Union are the reason for this current upsurge of the irrational. What is important is the emerging extremism that they may signal.

Sergei Kapitza
(1928-2012)
Russian physicist
President of the Physical Society of the U.S.S.R. and editor of the Russian edition of Scientific American,
"Antiscience Trends in the U.S.S.R.", Scientific American 265(2):32-38, August 1991

Religion is the impotence of the human mind to deal with occurrences it cannot understand.

Karl Marx
(1818-1893)
German journalist

If you have two religions in your land, the two will cut each other's throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

Where different faiths flourish side by side, renegades are looked upon with contempt even by the party whose belief they adapt; so completely has the idea of loyalty replaced that of truth-seeking.

Charles S. Peirce
(1839-1914)
American philosopher, pragmatist

We are incredibly heedless in the formation of our beliefs, but find ourselves filled with an illicit passion for them when anyone proposes to rob us of their companionship. It is obviously not the ideas themselves that are dear to us, but our self-esteem, which is threatened. We are by nature stubbornly pledged to defend our own from attack, whether it be our person, our family, our property, or our opinion.

James Harvey
(1929-1965)
American commercial artist

There is something feeble and a little contemptible about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably some part of him is aware that they are myths and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dare not face this thought! Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not real, he becomes furious when they are disputed.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher
"Human Society in Ethics and Politics"

I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.

Christopher Marlowe
(1564-1593)
English dramatist

People are zealous for a cause when they are not quite positive that it is true.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher

Religion is an illusion of childhood, outgrown under proper education.

Auguste Comte
(1798-1857)
French philosopher

Finding that no religion is based on facts and cannot be true, I began to reflect on what must be the condition of mankind trained from infancy to believe in errors.

Robert Owen
(1771-1858)
Welsh social reformer

I am myself a dissenter from all known religions, and I hope that every kind of religious belief will die out. I do not believe that, on the balance, religious belief has been a force of good . . . I regard it as belonging to the infancy development which we are outgrowing.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher

All religions bear traces of the fact that they arose during the intellectual immaturity of the human race-before it had learned the obligations to speak the truth. Not one of them makes it the duty of its god to be truthful and understandable in his communications.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)
German philosopher

I'm an atheist, and Christianity appears to me to be the most absurd imposture of all the religions, and I'm puzzled that so many people can't see through a religion that encourages irresponsibility and bigotry. As my ancestors are free from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion.

Butterfly McQueen
(1911-1995)
American actress

Christianity is the greater shackle, the greater rape of the black mind, than slavery ever was.

Barbara Hillary
(1931-2019)
American adventurer

If you are a black Christian, you have a real short memory.

Chris Rock
(1965-)
American satirist

All religions, with their gods, demigods, prophets, messiahs and saints, are the product of the fancy and credulity of men who have not yet reached the full development and complete possession of their intellectual powers.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer, opposed Marx
God and the State, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

A religion that has a personal God, outside of humanity, to worship and to please, is quite apt to get appointed an official to regulate the people, and particularly to execute punishment adequate to the offense committed against an Infinite Ruler of the universe. Humanity so likes authority, it seems sometimes as if it gloated upon the sufferings of its fellows.

Lucy Colman
(1817-1906)
American abolitionist and freethinker
Reminiscences, p. 54, quoted in American Atheist Magazine, Spring, 1997

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Products of Time and Place

When men are unable to form an idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand. This axiom explains the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of human nature. These errors are embraced by entire nations and scholars.

Giovanni Battista Vico
(1668-1744)
Italian jurist, philosopher

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

Anaïs Nin
(1903-1977)
French writer

We only see what we want to see; we only hear what we want to hear. Our belief system is just like a mirror that only shows us what we believe.

Miguel Angel Ruiz
(1952-)
Mexican writer

Most men's conscience, habits, and opinions are borrowed from convention and gathered continually comforting assurance from the same social consensus that originally suggested them.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

In the United States the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own . . . Religion itself hold sway there much less a doctrine of revelation than a commonly received opinion.

Alexis Charles Henri Maurice Clerel de Tocqueville
(1805-1859)
French statesman

Every man is the creature of the age in which he lives; very few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the times.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

Few people are capable of expressing with equanimity opinions which differ from the prejudices of their social environment. Most people are incapable of forming such opinion.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

What religion a man shall have is a historical accident, quite as much as what language he shall speak.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

Philosophy means the complete liberty of the mind, and therefore independence of all social, political, or religious prejudice . . . It loves one thing only--truth. If it disturbs the ready-made opinions of the Church or State--of the historical medium--in which the philosopher happens to have been born, so much the worse, but there is no help for it.

Henri Frederic Amiel
(1821-1881)
Swiss philosopher

The aim of a true philosophy must lie, not in futile efforts towards the complete accommodation of man to circumstances in which he chances to find himself, but in the maintenance of a kind of candid discontent, in the face of the very highest achievement.

Walter Pater
(1839-1894)
English man of letters

My reason taught me that I could not have made one of my own qualities - they were forced upon me by Nature; that my language, religion, and habits were forced upon me by Society; and that I was entirely the child of Nature and Society; that Nature gave the qualities and Society directed them. Thus was I forced, through seeing the error of their foundation, to abandon all belief in every religion which had been taught by man.

Robert Owen
(1771-1858)
Welsh social reformer

Nothing is more difficult and nothing requires more character than to find oneself in open opposition to one's time (and those one loves) and to say loudly: NO!

Kurt Tucholsky
(1890-1935)
German writer

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The Books

A hallmark of many religions is a reliance upon 'sacred' text. This is certainly the case with Christian, Islamic, Hebrew and many other faiths.

For instance regarding Christianity: the word "bible" originated from the terms "little books." Indeed, throughout the ongoing processes of translation, revision and canonization over the centuries, resulting compilations reflect various interests and purposes of its authors, promulgators and proponents.

I just want to point out that our situation is so uncanny - we have a world that has been shattered by literature.

Sam Harris
(1967-)
American philosopher and neuroscientist

Scriptures: the sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based.

Ambrose Bierce
(1842-c.-1914)
American journalist

Many Christians base the belief of a soul and God upon the Bible. Strictly speaking, there is no such book. To make the Bible, sixty-six books are bound into one volume. These books are written by many people at different times, and no one knows the time or the identity of any author. Some of the books were written by many people at different times. These books contain all sorts of contradictory concepts of life and morals and the origin of things. Between the first and the last nearly a thousand years intervened, a longer time than has passed since the discovery of America by Columbus.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer
Why I Am An Agnostic

Christianity has need of thought that it may come to the consciousness of its real self. For centuries it treasured the great commandment of love and mercy as traditional truth without recognizing it as a reason for opposing slavery, witch burning, torture, and all the other ancient and medieval forms of inhumanity. It was only when it experienced the influence of the thinking of the Age of Enlightenment that it was stirred into entering the struggle for humanity. The remembrance of this ought to preserve it forever from assuming any air of superiority in comparison with thought.

Albert Schweitzer
(1857-1965)
German-French physician, philosopher

Christianity persecuted, tortured, and burned. Like a hound it tracked the very scent of heresy. It kindled wars, and nursed furious hatred and ambitions. It sanctified, quite like Mohammedanism, extermination and tyranny. All this would have been impossible if, like Buddhism, it had only looked to peace and the liberation of souls. It looked beyond; it dreamt of infinite blisses and crowns it should be crowned with before an electrified universe and an applauding God.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

All that is necessary, as it seems to me, to convince any reasonable person that the Bible is simply and purely of human invention - of barbarian invention - is to read it. Read it as you would any other book; think of it as you would of any other; get the bandage of reverence from your eyes; drive from your heart the phantom of fear; push from the throne of your brain the coiled form of superstition - then read the Holy Bible, and you will be amazed that you ever, for one moment, supposed a being of infinite wisdom, goodness and purity, to be the author of such ignorance and of such atrocity.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker
The Gods, 1872

There is much in the Bible against which every instinct of my being rebels, so much that I regret the necessity which has compelled me to read it through from beginning to end. I do not think that the knowledge which I have gained of its history and sources compensates me for the unpleasant details it has forced upon my attention.

Helen Keller
(1880-1968)
American writer

Atheism is what happens when you read the bible. Christianity is what happens when somebody else reads it for you.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer

Well, I think mockery of religion is one of the most essential things because to demystify supposedly 'holy text dictated by god' and show that they are man-made ... to show ... internal inconsistencies and absurdities. One of the beginnings of human emancipation is the ability to laugh at authority ... it is an indispensable thing. People can call it blasphemy if they like, but if they call it that they have to assume there is something to be blasphemed - some divine work, well I don't accept their premise.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

The Bible is a mass of fables and traditions, mere mythology.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer
Mark Twain and the Bible

The Bible is a wonderful source of inspiration for those who don't understand it.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot

The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion. Yet this is trash that the Church imposes upon the world as the Word of God; this is the collection of lies and contradictions called the Holy Bible! This is the rubbish called Revealed Religion!

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot

I wish it (Christianity) were more productive of good works . . . I mean real good works . . . not holy-day keeping, sermon-hearing . . . or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments despised by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity.

Benjamin Franklin
(1706-1790)
American scientist, diplomat, publisher

The Bible is the greatest hoax in all history. The leading characters of the Old Testament would today be in the penitentiary and those of the New would be under observation in the psychopathic wards.

Charles Smith
(1887-1964)
American atheist activist

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
The God Delusion

Remember that millions of Christians still base their belief in a God upon the words of the Bible, which is a collection of the most flabbergasting fictions ever imagined -- by men, too, who had lawless but very poor and crude imagination. Ingersoll and numerous other critics have shot the Christian holy book full of holes. It is worthless and proves nothing concerning the existence of a God. The idea of a God is worthless and unprovable.

E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Meaning of Atheism"

Historical investigations have revealed to us the origin and growth of the Bible. We know that by this name we designate a collection of writings as radically unlike in origin, character and contents, as if the

Nibelungen Lied, Mirabeau's speeches, Heine's love poems and a manual of zoology has been printed and mixed up promiscuously, and then bound into one volume.

We find collected in this book the superstitious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of Palestine, with indistinct echoes of Indian and Persian fables, mistaken imitations of Egyptian theories and customs, historical chronicles as dry Jewish-national, which are rarely distinguished by beauties of the highest order, but frequently by superfluity of expression, coarseness, bad taste, and genuine Oriental sensuality.

As a literary monument the Bible is of much later origin that the Vedas; as a work of literary value it is surpassed by everything written in the last two thousand years by authors even of second rank, and to compare it seriously with the production of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe would require a fantasized mind that had entirely lost its power of judgment. Its conception of the universe is childish, and its morality revolting, as revealed in the malicious vengeance attributed to God in the Old Testament and in the New, the parable of the laborers of the eleventh hour and the episodes of Mary Magdalen and the woman taken in adultery.

Max Nordau
(1849-1923)
German writer, physician

Christian morality (so-called) has all the characters of a reaction; . . . Its ideal is negative rather than positive; passive rather that active; Innocence rather than Nobleness; Abstinence from Evil, rather than energetic Pursuit of Good . . . It holds out the hope of heaven and the threat of hell, as the appointed and appropriate motives to a virtuous life: in this falling far below the best of the ancients, and doing what lies in it to give to human morality an essentially selfish character . . . It is essentially the doctrine of passive obedience; it inculcates submission to all authorities found established.

John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)
British economist, philosopher

Morality does not depend on religion.

John Ruskin
(1819-1900)
English art critic
from Ira D. Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion
also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Morality is doing what is right, no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told, no matter what is right.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

The foundation of morality should not be made dependent on myth nor tied to any authority lest doubt about the myth or about the legitimacy of the authority imperil the foundation of sound judgment and action.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

The Bible as we have it contains elements that are scientifically incorrect or even morally repugnant. No amount of 'explaining away' can convince us that such passages are the product of Divine Wisdom.

Bernard J. Bamberger
(1904-1980)
American rabbi, writer

Theology is the science of the divine lie.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer
from George Seldes, ed., The Great Quotations,
also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Christianity is the complete negation of common sense and sound reason.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer
God and the State

The story of the redemption will not stand examination. That man should redeem himself from the sin of eating an apple by committing a murder on Jesus Christ, is the strangest system of religion ever set up.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot

That the system of morals propounded in the New Testament contained no maxim which had not been previously enunciated, and that some of the most beautiful passages in the apostolic writings are quotations from Pagan authors, is well known to every scholar.... To assert that Christianity communicated to man moral truths previously unknown, argues on the part of the asserted either gross ignorance or willful fraud.

Henry Thomas Buckle
(1821-1862)
British historian
History of Civilization, Vol. I, p. 129

Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the Church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass. Other pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist result. From Egypt came the ideas of a divine trinity, the Last Judgement, and a personal immortality of reward and punishment; from Egypt the adoration of the Mother and Child, and the mystic theosophy that made Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and obscured the Christian creed; there, too, Christian monasticism would find its exemplars and its source. From Phrygia came the worship of the Great Mother; from Syria the resurrection drama of Adonis; from Thrace, perhaps the cult of Dionysus, the dying and saving god. From Persia came millennarianism, the "ages of the world," the "final conflagration," the dualism of Satan and God, of Darkness and Light; already in the Fourth Gospel Christ is the "Light shining in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out." The Mithraic ritual so closely resembled the eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass that Christian fathers charged the Devil with inventing these similarities to mislead frail minds. Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world.

Will Durant and Ariel Durant
(1885-1981)(1898-1981)
American historians
The Story of Civilization

Just as Philo, learned in Greek speculation, had felt a need to rephrase Judaism in forms acceptable to the logic-loving Greeks, so John, having lived for two generations in a Hellenistic environment, sought to give a Greek philosophical tinge to the mystic Jewish doctrine that the Wisdom of God was a living being, and to the Christian doctrine that Jesus was the Messiah. Consciously or not, he continued Paul's work of detaching Christianity from Judaism. Christ was no longer presented as a Jew, living more or less under the Jewish Law; he was made to address the Jews as "you," and to speak of their Law as "yours"; he was not a Messiah sent "to save the lost sheep of Israel," he was the coeternal Son of God; not merely the future judge of mankind, but the primeval creator of the universe. In this perspective the Jewish life of the man Jesus could be put into the background, faded almost as in Gnostic heresy; and the god Christ was assimilated to the religious and philosophical traditions of the Hellenistic mind. Now the pagan world-- even the anti-Semitic world--could accept him as its own.

Will Durant and Ariel Durant
(1885-1981)(1898-1981)
American historians
The Story of Civilization

Where would Christianity be if Jesus got eight to fifteen years with time off for good behavior?

James Donovan
(1923-1990)
NY State Senator
speaking in support of capital punishment

The night of December 25, to which date the Nativity of Christ was ultimately assigned, was exactly that of the birth of the Persian savior Mithra, who, as an incarnation of eternal light, was born the night of the winter solstice (then dated December 25) at midnight, the instant of the turn of the year from increasing darkness to light.

Joseph Campbell
(1904-1987)
American anthropologist
The Mythic Image, Bollingen Series C,
Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 33

It was the craving to be a one and only people which impelled the ancient Hebrews to invent a one and only God whose one and only people they were to be.

Eric Hoffer
(1902-1983)
American philosopher
cited in Eugene Brussell Dictionary of Quotable Definitions (1970),
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

... would have hated to have seen how much worse the Holocaust would have been if those of the Hebrew faith hadn't been their own God's chosen people.

Scott Durkin
(1959-)
American educator

In the Middle East, the Bronze Age people of Canaan--the ancient region between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean that roughly corresponds to Israel--also failed to adapt to the drying out of their lands around 2200 BC(E). In their case, says Arlene Rosen of Ben Gurion University of the Negev, it was their beliefs that were their undoing. "In Canaan, people believed that environmental disasters were caused by a deity unhappy with the people," she says. Like the Mayans, the Canaanites could have coped with the new conditions by introducing new irrigation systems for their crops. Instead, they attributed the shift in climate to the wrath of the gods, built more temples and prayed for better times. Within a short time, the cities and towns were abandoned and the people became nomadic herders.

'Rigid' cultures caught out by climate change, article in the 5 March 1994 edition of _New Scientist_

Koranic teaching still insists that the sun moves around the earth. How can we advance when they teach things like that?

Taslima Nasreen
(1962-)
Bangladeshi author
'Time' magazine, 31st Jan 1994

When a man has once brought himself to accept uncritically all the absurdities that religious doctrines put before him and even to overlook the contradictions between them, we need not be greatly surprised at the weakness of his intellect.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist
The Future of an Illusion

... the Bible was a collection of books written at different times by different men -- a strange mixture of diverse human documents -- and a tissue of irreconcilable notions. Inspired? The Bible is not even intelligent. It is not even good craftsmanship, but is full of absurdities and contradictions.
E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Meaning Of Atheism"

Few intelligent Christians can still hold to the idea that the Bible is an infallible Book, that it contains no linguistic errors, no historical discrepancies, no antiquated scientific assumptions, not even bad ethical standards. Historical investigation and literary criticism have taken the magic out of the Bible and have made it a composite human book, written by many hands in different ages. The existence of thousands of variations of texts makes it impossible to hold the doctrine of a book verbally infallible. Some might claim for the original copies of the Bible an infallible character, but this view only begs the question and makes such Christian apologetics more ridiculous in the eyes of the sincere man.

Elmer Homrighausen
(1900-1992)
American theologian
Christianity in America, p. 121, Theological Seminary

We have heard talk enough. We have listened to all the drowsy, idealess, vapid sermons that we wish to hear. We have read your Bible and the works of your best minds. We have heard your prayers, your solemn groans and your reverential amens. All these amount to less than nothing. We want one fact. We beg at the doors of your churches for just one little fact. We pass our hats along your pews and under your pulpits and implore you for just one fact. We know all about your moldy wonders and your stale miracles.

We want a this year's fact. We ask only one. Give us one fact for charity. Your miracles are too ancient. The witnesses have been dead for nearly two thousand years.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

You're damn right we need a rational code of morality and ethics. But not much progress can be made in that direction while we've still got a majority ranting about gods, devils, souls, and absolute morality, and using an ancient book written by ignorant nomads as a guide.

Doug Graham

ROONEY: Did you really seriously worry about going to prison?

KEVORKIAN: No! Never! Am I a criminal? The world knows I'm not a criminal! What are they trying to put me in jail for? You've lost common sense in this society because of religious fanaticism and dogma. You're basing your laws, and your whole outlook on natural life, on mythology! It won't work! That's why you have all these problems in the world. Name them -- India, Pakistan, Ireland. Name them! All these problems -- they're all religious problems!

Jack Kevorkian
(1928-2011)
American physician
with Andy Rooney on _60 Minutes_

During many ages there were witches. The Bible said so. The Bible commanded that they should not be allowed to live. Therefore the Church, after doing its duty in but a lazy and indolent way for 800 years, gathered up its halters, thumbscrews, and firebrands, and set about its holy work in earnest. She worked hard at it night and day during nine centuries and imprisoned, tortured, hanged, and burned whole hordes and armies of witches, and washed the Christian world clean with their foul blood. Then it was discovered that there was no such thing as witches, and never had been. One does not know whether to laugh or to cry.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer
"Europe and Elsewhere"

These people's God has shown them by a million acts that he respects none of the Bible's statues. He breaks every one of them himself, adultery and all.

Maxwell Geismar
(1909-1992)

American writer
Mark Twain and the Three R's, by Maxwell Geismar, p.124

There are no witches. The witch text remains; only the practice has changed. Hell fire is gone, but the text remains. Infant damnation is gone, but the text remains. More than two hundred death penalties are gone from the law books, but the texts that authorized them remains.

Maxwell Geismar
(1909-1992)
American writer
Mark Twain and the Three R's, p.110

I regard monotheism as the greatest disaster ever to befall the human race. I see no good in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam -- good people, yes, but any religion based on a single, well, frenzied and virulent god, is not as useful to the human race as, say, Confucianism, which is not a religion but an ethical and educational system.

Gore Vidal
(1925-2012)
American writer
At Home, 1988
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

I know of no book which has been a source of brutality and sadistic conduct, both public and private, that can compare with the Bible.

Sir James Paget
(1814-1899)
British surgeon, pathologist
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

The radical defect in Christianity is that it tried to win the world by a bribe, and it has become a nullity.

Ouida [Marie Louise de la Ram"e]
(1839-1908)
British novelist
The Failure of Christianity
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Christianity has in fact long vanished, not only from the reason but also from the life of mankind, and it is nothing more than a fixed idea.

Ludwig Feuerbach
(1804-1872)
German philosopher
On Philosophy and Christianity (1839)
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

There was a time when religion ruled the world. It is known as the Dark Ages.

Ruth Hurmence Green
(1915-1981)
American author
Women Without Superstition

By trying to adjust to the findings that it once tried so viciously to ban and repress, religion has only succeeded in restating the same questions that undermined it in earlier epochs. What kind of designer or creator is so wasteful and capricious and approximate? What kind of designer or creator is so cruel and indifferent? And-most of all-what kind of designer or creator only chooses to "reveal" himself to semi-stupefied peasants in desert regions?

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
The Portable Atheist

Top

Life of Brian

If Jesus had been killed 20 years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.

Lenny Bruce
(1925-1966)
American social critic, stand-up comedian

But as a scientist I cannot help feeling that all religions are on a tottering foundation. None is perfect or inspired. As for their prophets, there are as many today as ever before, only now science refuses to let them overstep the bounds of common sense. The idea that a good God would send people to a burning hell is utterly damnable to me. I don't want to have anything to do with such a God. But while I cannot conceive of such a God, I do recognize the existence of a great universal power -- a power which we cannot even begin to comprehend and might as well not attempt to. It may be a conscious mind, or it may not. I don't know. As a scientist I should like to know, but as a man, I am not so vitally concerned. As for Christ -- well, he has been most outrageously belied. His followers, like those of many scientists and literary men, have so garbled his words and conduct that many of them no longer apply to present life.

Luther Burbank
(1849-1926)
American horticulturist

Christ was a wonderful psychologist. He was an infidel of his day because he rebelled against the prevailing religions and government. I am a lover of Christ as a man, and his work and all things that help humanity, but nevertheless just as he was an infidel then, I am an infidel today.

Luther Burbank
(1849-1926)
American horticulturist

No sooner had Jesus knocked over the dragon of superstition then Paul boldly set it on its legs again in the name of Jesus.

George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950)
Irish dramatist

I believe Christ was a man like ourselves; to look upon him as God would seem to me the greatest of sacrileges.

Count Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy
(1828-1910)
Russian writer

If Christ were here now there is one thing he would not be -- a Christian.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer
"Notebook"

I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians, Your christians are so unlike your christ.

Mahatma Gandhi
(1869-1948)
Hindu national leader, philosopher

We found that we didn't have much problem with him [J.C.], it was his followers we found questionable.

Graham Chapman
(1941-1989)
British actor, member of Monty Python
discussing making of "Life of Brian"

Organized Christianity has probably done more to retard the ideals that were its founder's than any other agency in the world.

Richard Le Gallienne
(1866-1947)
English author and poet

Christ rode on an ass, but now asses ride on Christ.

Heinrich Heine
(1797-1856)
German writer

The myth of conception and birth of Jesus Christ is mere fiction, and is at the same stage of superstition as a hundred other myths of other religions.

Ernst Heinrich Haeckel
(1834-1919)
German biologist, philosopher

And the day will come, when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as His Father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva, in the brain of Jupiter.

Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)
Third President of the United States

The church lives on the fact that modern research about Jesus is not known amongst the public.

Hans Conzelmann
(1915-1989)
German theologian

Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.

Robert Owen
(1771-1858)
Welsh social reformer

The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it. Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who were filled with this highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as atheists, sometimes also as saints.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

Top

Faith/Belief

Q: How do we form our beliefs?

Beliefs are established by our experience, and by our interaction with the world and they can be very hard to dislodge. And it takes a lot of effort to examine and reconsider, and particularly abandon opinions, convictions that you had when you learn there are alternatives. And I think one of the hardest tasks the human mind can face is reserving judgement about a conviction that has always seemed to you obvious and thinking about how maybe that may not be right.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher
Tufts interview

Thus blind faith is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves; insatiable desire a substitute for hope; accumulation a substitute for growth; fervent hustling a substitute for purposeful action, and pride a substitute for unattainable self-respect.

Eric Hoffer
(1902-1983)
American philosopher

Faith, noun - Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge of things without parallel.

Ambrose Bierce
(1842-c. 1914)
American journalist

No miracle has ever taken place under conditions which science can accept. Experience shows, without exception, that miracles occur only in times and in countries in which miracles are believed in, and in the presence of persons who are disposed to believe in them.

Ernest Renan
(1823-1892)
French historian

How many things which served us yesterday as articles of faith, are fables for us today.

Michel Eyquen de Montaigne
(1533-1592)
French philosopher

Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know.

Michel Eyquen de Montaigne
(1533-1592)
French philosopher

It seems to me that the bane of our country is a profession of faith either with no basis of real belief, or with no proper examination of the grounds on which the creed is supposed to rest.

James Russell Lowell
(1819-1891
American writer, diplomat
from Rufus K. Noyes, Views of Religion,
Also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

It was the schoolboy who said, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer
Following the Equator, ch. 12, "Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar" (1897).

Faith is the effort to believe what your common sense tells you is not true.

Elbert Hubbard
(1856-1915)
American writer and publisher

The difference between faith and insanity is that faith is the ability to hold firmly to a conclusion that is incompatible with the evidence.

William Harwood
( )
American professor

Absolute faith corrupts as absolutely as absolute power.

Eric Hoffer
(1902-1983)
American philosopher
Reflections on the Human Condition (1973) The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations

When we believe ourselves in possession of the only truth, we are likely to be indifferent to common everyday truths.

Eric Hoffer
(1902-1983)
American philosopher
The Passionate State of Mind, aph. 83 (1955)

Faith is the antithesis of proof.

Edward J. Greenfield
NY State Supreme Court Justice
1995

Faith is an absolutely marvelous tool. With faith there is no question too big for even the smallest mind.

Rev. Donald Morgan
(1933-)
Atheist theologian

As nature preserves a fixed and immutable order; it must clearly follow that miracles are only intelligible as a relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.

Baruch Spinoza
(1632-1677)
Dutch philosopher
Ethica ordine geometrica demonstrata

The doctrine of salvation by faith is a libel on justice and has done more to undermine the virtue of the world than vice itself.

Lemuel K. Washburn
American writer (19th century)
Is The Bible Worth Reading And Other Essays

Believing is easier than thinking. Hence so many more believers than thinkers.

Bruce Calvert

Another meme of the religious meme complex is called faith. It means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence. The story of Doubting Thomas is told, not so that we shall admire Thomas, but so that we can admire the other apostles in comparison. Thomas demanded evidence. Nothing is more lethal for certain kinds of meme than a tendency to look for evidence. The other apostles, whose faith was so strong that they did not need evidence, are held up to us as worthy of imitation. The meme for blind faith secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist "The Selfish Gene"

Whatever sympathy I feel towards religions, whatever admiration for some of their adherents, whatever historical or biological necessity I see in them, whatever metaphorical truth, I cannot accept them as credible explanations of reality; and they are incredible to me in proportion to the degree that they require my belief in positive human attributes and intervenient powers in their divinities.

John Fowles
(1926-2005)
British writer
The Aristos

A religion is sometimes a source of happiness, and I would not deprive anyone of happiness. But it is a comfort appropriate for the weak, not for the strong. The great trouble with religion - any religion - is that a religionist, having accepted certain propositions by faith, cannot thereafter judge those propositions by evidence. One may bask at the warm fire of faith or choose to live in the bleak certainty of reason- but one cannot have both.

Robert Heinlein
(1907-1988)
American writer
from "Friday"

Blind faith can justify anything. In a man believes in a different god, or even if he uses a different ritual for worshipping the same god, blind faith can decree that he should die - on the cross, at the stake, skewered on a Crusader's sword, shot in a Beirut street, or blown up in a bar in Belfast. Memes for blind faith have their own ruthless ways of propagating themselves. This is true of patriotic and political as well as religious blind faith.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
"The Selfish Gene"

And it's not just faith itself: it's the idea that faith is a virtue and the less evidence there is, the more virtuous it is. You can actually quote, well, Tertullian for example: "It is certain because it is impossible." Sir Thomas Brown, actually seeking for more difficult things to believe, because things for which there is mere evidence are just too easy, and it's no test of his faith. In order to have a test of your faith, you must be asked to believe really daft things like the transubstantiation, you know, the blood of Christ turning into wine, and stuff... That is so manifestly absurd that you've got to be a really great believer, in the class of the Electric Monk, in order to believe it..... You're actually showing off your believing credentials by the ability to believe something like that... If it were an easy thing to believe, substantiated by facts, then it wouldn't be any great achievement.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
interview with Douglas Adams

The self-assured believer is a greater sinner in the eyes of God than the troubled disbeliever.

Soren Kierkegaard
(1813-1855)
Danish theologian

Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.... A man full of faith is simply one who has lost (or never had) the capacity for clear and realistic thought. He is not a mere ass: he is actually ill.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer
New York Times Magazine, 11 September 1955

You can't convince a believer of anything; for their belief is not based on evidence, it's based on a deep seated need to believe.

Carl Sagan
(1934-1996)
American astronomer

It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

W. K. Clifford
(1845-1879)
British mathematician, philosopher

To surrender to ignorance and call it God has always been premature, and it remains premature today.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer

To believe without evidence and demonstration is an act of ignorance and folly.

Constantin Francios de Volney
(1757-1820)
French philosopher

Faith is often the boast of the man who is too lazy to investigate.

F. M. Knowles

Is there an intelligent man or woman now in the world who believes in the Garden of Eden story? If you find any man who believes it, strike his forehead and you will hear an echo. Something is for rent.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

It seems to me that the bane of our country is a profession of faith either with no basis of real belief, or with no proper examination of the grounds on which the creed is supposed to rest.

James Russell Lowell
(1819-1891)
American writer, diplomat

A man is his easiest dupe, for what he wishes to be true he generally believes to be true.

Demosthenes
(384-322)
Athenian orator, statesman

The majority of men . . . are not capable of thinking, but only of believing, and . . . are not accessible to reason, but only to authority.

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)
German philosopher

Timid men prefer the calm of despotism to the boisterous sea of liberty.

Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)
Third President of the United States

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge -- even to ourselves -- that we've been so credulous. (So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new bamboozles rise.)

Carl Sagan
(1934-1996)
American astronomer
"The Fine Art of Baloney Detection"

I try not to have faith. I believe in a principle that was enunciated rather well by Bertrand Russell, which is that you should try to keep away from having irrational beliefs. You should believe some things that for which you can find some evidence or some support apart from commitment to principles like equality, and freedom, and justice, and so on. Those, I wouldn't say that's faith, that's are things you are committed to, but as far as beliefs about the world ... reality ... my feeling is one should try to as much as possible have substantiated beliefs, or at least beliefs for which evidence could be appropriate.

Noam Chomsky
(1928-)
American professor
50 Renowned Academics Speaking About God (Part 1)

We may define 'faith' as the firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. 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. The substitution of emotion for evidence is apt to lead to strife, since different groups substitute different emotions.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Faith offers no way to discover the truth about anything, but it's a great way to stay wrong forever, and not know it ...

Aaron Ra
(1962-)
American atheist activist

Q: How can we agree on what is real?

One of the hardest lessons to accept is that people who don't agree with you are not flaming idiots. There's something behind what they think that if you don't understand, you're not going to be able to communicate. However gratifying, however satisfying it may be to your sense of righteousness and order, you can't beat people over the head with a logic stick and get them to change their minds. You have to meet them on their own ground, and it's hard work, and it often doesn't work, but we just have to keep trying.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher
Tufts interview

Q: How can we persuade others to change their beliefs?

I think one of the things that I've learned, and made it a big part of my practice as a philosopher, is you almost never see somebody change their mind because they've been given a formal argument with premises and a logical conclusion, and it's just beaten into them. You know, accept this conclusion or die. That doesn't work. You have to enliven the imagination. You have to sometimes even trick, cajole, seduce people into seeing things a different way. I think philosophy is not so much of science as it is an art of imagination instruction, in a way.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher
Tufts interview

Top

Illusion

Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

Aesop
(620-560)
Greek fabulist

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of Hell, a hell of Heaven

John Milton
(1608-1674)
English poet
Paradise Lost

Sacrificing the earth for paradise is giving up the substance for the shadow.

Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)
French writer
Rufus K. Noyes, Views of Religion
also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Nothing is so easy as to deceive one's self; for what we wish, that we readily believe.

Demosthenes
(384-322)
Athenian orator, statesman

Whenever philosophy has taken into its plan religion, it has ended in skepticism; and whenever religion excludes philosophy, or the spirit of free inquiry, it leads to willful blindness and superstition.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1772-1834) English poet
Allsop's Letters

Religion is a collective insanity.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer

from Rufus K. Noyes, Views of Religion
also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

In Christendom, the greater part of this long period was consumed in disputes respecting the nature of God, and in struggles for ecclesiastical power. The authority of the Fathers, and the prevailing belief that the Scriptures contain the sum of all knowledge, discouraged any investigation of Nature. If by chance a passing interest was taken in some astronomical question, it was at once settled by a reference to such authorities as the writings of Augustine or Lactantius, not by an appeal to the phenomena of the heavens. So great was the preference given to sacred over profane learning that Christianity had been in existence fifteen hundred years, and had not produced a single astronomer.

John William Draper
(1811-1882)
British-born American scientist
History of the Conflict between Religion and Science, Chapter 6 (1910 edition)

God is only a great imaginative experience.

D. H. Lawrence
(1885-1930)
British writer
"Introduction to The Dragon of the Apocalypse by Frederick Carter," in London Mercury (July 1930, repr. in Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence, pt. 4, ed. by E. McDonald, 1936).

Homo religiosus invents religious symbols, which he venerates and worships to save him from facing the finality of his death and dissolution. He devises paradise fictions to provide succor and support.... In acts of supreme self-deception, at various times and in various places he has been willing to profess belief in the most incredible myths because of what they have promised him....

Paul Kurtz
(1925-2012)
American philosopher
The Transcendental Temptation (1986), preface from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

A Galileo could no more be elected president of the United States than he could be elected Pope of Rome. Both high posts are reserved for men favored by God with an extraordinary genius for swathing the bitter facts of life in bandages of self-illusion.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

Even the weakest disputant is made so conceited by what he calls religion, as to think himself wiser than the wisest who thinks differently from him.

Walter Savage Landor
(1775-1864)
British writer
Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion Melanchthon and Calvin, Imaginary Conversations (1824-29), from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

In God We Trust. It is the choicest compliment that has ever been paid us, and the most gratifying to our feelings. It is simple, direct, gracefully phrased; it always sounds well -- In God We Trust. I don't believe it would sound any better if it were true. I bring you the stately matron named Christendom, returning bedraggled, besmirched and dishonored from pirate raids in Kiao-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer
"Christianity" A Salutation Speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth, New York, Dec. 31, 1900.

The faith in which I was brought up assured me that I was better than other people; I was saved, they were damned ... Our hymns were loaded with arrogance -- self-congratulation on how cozy we were with the Almighty and what a high opinion he had of us, what hell everybody else would catch come Judgment Day.

Robert Heinlein
(1907-1988)
American writer

The cosmos is a gigantic fly wheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it. Religion is the theory that the wheel was designed and set spinning to give him the ride.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

Leave it to humans to think life has a purpose for them.

Tim Minchin
(1975-)
British-born Australian musician

Imagine the people who believe such things and who are not ashamed to ignore, totally, all the patient findings of thinking minds through all the centuries since the Bible was written. And it is these ignorant people, the most uneducated, the most unimaginative, the most unthinking among us, who would make themselves the guides and leaders of us all; who would force their feeble and childish beliefs on us; who would invade our schools and libraries and homes.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer
Canadian Atheists Newsletter, 1994

The Boy Scouts of America maintain that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to God.

Boy Scouts of America, statement on membership form

The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship...

Boy Scouts of America policy, 1970

...Any organization could profit from a 10-year-old member with enough strength of character to refuse to swear falsely.

New York Times editorial, 12/12/93, on the Boy Scouts' refusing membership to Mark Welsh, who would not sign a religious oath

I am treated as evil by people who claim that they are being oppressed because they are not allowed to force me to practice what they do.

D. Dale Gulledge

Every religion has for its foundation a miracle -- that is to say, a violation of nature -- that is to say, a falsehood. Only the very ignorant are perfectly satisfied that they know. To the common man the great problems are easy. He has no trouble in accounting for the universe. He can tell you the origin and destiny of man and the why and wherefore of things.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

What the mind doesn't understand, it worships or fears.

Alice Walker
(1944-)
American writer
"The Temple of My Familiar"

To sum up (or I shall be pursuing the infinite), it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly in some form, though it has none at all with wisdom. If you want proofs of this, first consider the fact that the very young and the very old, women and simpletons, are the people who take the greatest delight in sacred and holy things, and are therefore always found nearest the altars, led there doubtless solely by their natural instinct. Secondly, you can see how the first great founders of the faith were great lovers of simplicity and bitter enemies of learning. Finally, the biggest fools of all appear to be those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety. They squander their possessions, ignore insults, submit to being cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, sustain themselves on fasting, vigils, tears, toil and humiliations, scorn life and desire only death - in short, they seem to be dead to any normal feelings, as if their spirit dwelt elsewhere than in their body. What else can that be but madness? And so we should not be surprised if the apostles were thought to be drunk on new wine, and Festus judged Paul to be mad.

Desiderius Erasmus
(1466-1536)
Dutch theologian
'Praise of Folly'

Each religion, so dear to those whose life it sanctifies, and fulfilling so necessary a function in the society that has adopted it, necessarily contradicts every other religion, and probably contradicts itself.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher
Reason in Religion

One might be asked "How can you prove that a god does not exist?" One can only reply that it is scarcely necessary to disprove what has never been proved.

David A. Spitz

If God can do anything he can make a stone so heavy that even he can't lift it. Then there is something God cannot do, he cannot lift the stone. Therefore God does not exist.

Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus)
(c. 99-c. 55)
Roman poet

If God is love, and if God is also omnipresent, then the Devil cannot exist. If the Devil exists, God cannot be love and also be omnipresent. Yet, an omnipresent God of love and the Devil are both said to exist. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure that there is something wrong here!

Rev. Donald Morgan
Atheist theologian

There are two things which cannot be attacked in front: ignorance and narrow-mindedness. They can only be shaken by the simple development of the contrary qualities. They will not bear discussion.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg (First Baron) Acton
(1834-1902)
British historian
Letter, 23 Jan. 1861 (published in Lord Acton and his Circle, Letter 74, ed. by Abbot Gasquet, 1906)

To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavoring to convert an atheist by scripture.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot

Unfortunately they cannot succeed in refuting the fact that the appearance and utterances of their spirits are merely the products of their own mental activity.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist
The Future of an Illusion

There is no polite way to suggest to someone that they have devoted their life to a folly.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

Barking at the Sky

... thoughts and prayers are not enough.

Barack Obama
(1961-)
44th President of the United States

As man's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

Faith and Prayers are no substitute for Knowledge and Courage.

Joseph Lewis
(1889-1968)
American atheist

Pray, verb - To ask the laws of the universe to be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner who confesses to his unworthiness.

Ambrose Bierce
(1842-c. 1914)
American journalist

Scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by laws of nature, and therefore this holds for the action of people. For this reason, a research scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by a prayer, i.e. by a wish addressed to a Supernatural Being.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
1936, responding to a child who wrote and asked if scientists pray. Source: Albert Einstein: The Human Side, Edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffmann

Surely our clergy need not be surprised at the daily increasing distrust in the public mind of the efficacy of prayer.

John Ruskin
(1819-1900)

English philosopher and artist
from Ira D. Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Labor is the only prayer that Nature answers.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Over the years I realized the god I prayed to was the god I invented. When I was talking to him, I was talking to myself. He had no understanding or qualities that I did not have. When I realized god was an extension of my imagination, I stopped praying to him.

David Starr Jordan
(1851-1931)
American educator
Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion

Saying your prayers could be a health hazard according to a report in the Medical Journal of Australia. Dr. Margaret T. Taylor traced a case of lead poisoning to the rosary beads an eight-year-old girl was in the habit of kissing. Dr. Taylor suggested that lead poisoning from the same source could account for anemia among nuns and other members of the Catholic faith.

Cleveland Press, as quoted in _True Facts_

I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

Frederick Douglass
(c.1818-1895)
American author, abolitionist

Prayers never bring anything... They may bring solace to the sap, the bigot, the ignorant, the aboriginal, and the lazy - but to the enlightened it is the same as asking Santa Claus to bring you something for Xmas.

W. C. Fields
(1880-1946)
American comedic actor

The most ridiculous concept ever perpetrated by Homo Sapiens is that the Lord God of Creation, Shaper and Ruler of the Universes, wants the saccharine adoration of his creations, that he can be persuaded by

their prayers, and becomes petulant if he does not receive this flattery. Yet this ridiculous notion, without one real shred of evidence to bolster it, has gone on to found one of the oldest, largest and least productive industries in history.

Robert Heinlein
(1907-1988)
American writer
Lazarus Long, from "Time Enough For Love"

We will not, therefore, lose our time praying to an imaginary god for things which our own exertions alone can procure.

Francisco Ferrer
(1859-1909)
Spanish freethinker

What we have here is religious bigotry, and it represents the same insidious type of exclusion that I experienced growing up black in Dixie.

Stefan Goodwin
Morgan State professor
on religious convocation ceremonies Washington Post, August 17, 1994

The notion of religious liberty is that you cannot be forced to participate in a religious ceremony that's not of your choosing simply because you're out-voted.

Ira Glasser
(1931-)
Fifth Director of ACLU
1995

The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by "God" one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity.

Carl Sagan
(1934-1996)
American astronomer

Prayers and sacrifices are of no avail.

Aristotle
(c384-322 B.C.)
Greek philosopher
from Ira D. Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Christians say that--without exception--their God answers all of their prayers; it's just that He sometimes says "yes" and other times "no," "maybe," or "wait." Of course the same could be said of the rain-god, "Bob."

Rev. Donald Morgan
(1933-)
Atheist theologian

A tendency to drastically underestimate the frequency of coincidence is a prime characteristic of innumerates, who generally accord great significance to correspondences of all sorts while attributing too little significance to quite conclusive but less flashy statistical evidence.

John Allen Paulos
(1945-)
American mathematician
"Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and its Consequences"

Praying is like a rocking chair -- it'll give you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere.

Gypsy Rose Lee [Rose Louise Hovick]
(1914-1970)
American actor, writer
quoted by E. Haldeman-Julius, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

The feeling which prompts prayer ... I should like to see guided, not extinguished -- devoted to practicable objects instead of wasted upon air.

John Tyndall
(1820-1893)
Irish physicist
Fragments of Science for Unscientific People, (1871)

Man must learn to rely upon himself. Reading bibles will not protect him from the blasts of winter, but houses, fires and clothing will. To prevent famine, one plow is worth a million sermons, and even patent medicines will cure more diseases than all the prayers uttered since the beginning of the world.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker
The Gods, 1872

I don't pray for results. I just ask that I get the strength to give it my all.

Coco Gauff
American professional tennis player
(2004-)

Top

The Middlemen

Missionaries are perfect nuisances and leave every place worse than they found it.

Charles Dickens
(1812-1870)
British novelist

The missionaries go forth to Christianize the savages - as if the savages weren't dangerous enough already.

Edward Abbey
(1927-1989)
American writer

When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.

Desmond Tutu
(1931-2021)
South African social rights activist

But the churchmen fain would kill their church,
As the churches have killed their Christ.

Alfred, 1st Lord Tennyson
(1809-1892)
British poet

A theologian is like a blind person in a dark room searching for a black cat which isn't there -- and finding it!

Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)
Irish writer

The supernatural Christ of the New Testament, the god of orthodox Christianity, is dead. But priestcraft lives and conjures up the ghost of this dead god to frighten and enslave the masses of mankind. The name of Christ has caused more persecutions, wars, and miseries than any other name has caused. The darkest wrongs are still inspired by it. The wails of anguish that went up from Kishenev, Odessa, and Bialystok still vibrate in our ears.

John E. Remsberg
(1848-1919)
American writer
The Christ (1909)

History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government. This marks the lowest grade of ignorance of which their civil as well as religious leaders will always avail themselves for their own purposes.

Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)
Third President of the United States
Thomas Jefferson to Alexander von Humboldt, 1813

If priests had not been fond of mutton, lambs never would have been sacrificed to god. Nothing was ever carried to the temple that the priest could not use, and it always happened that god wanted what his agents liked.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

We should always be disposed to believe that which appears white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides.

Ignatius of Loyola
(1491-1556)
Spanish theologian
[Jesuits], Exercitia spiritualia, 1541

What is the function that a clergyman performs in the world? Answer: he gets his living by assuring idiots that he can save them from an imaginary hell.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer
"Minority Reports"

Religious Displays, as distinct from religious beliefs, are submissive acts performed towards dominant individuals called gods. The acts themselves include various forms of body-lowering, such as kneeling, bowing, kowtowing, salaaming and prostrating; also chanting and rituals of debasement and sacrifice; the offering of gifts to the gods and the making of symbolic gestures of allegiance.

The function of these actions is to appease the super-dominant beings and thereby obtains favors or avoid punishments. There is nothing unusual about this behavior in itself. Subordinates throughout the animal world subject themselves to their most powerful companions in a similar way. But the strange feature of these human submissive actions, as we encounter them today, is that they are performed towards a dominant figure, or figures, who are never present in person. Instead they are represented by images and artifacts and operate entirely through agents called holy-men or priests. These middle-men enjoy a position of social influence and respect because some of the power of the gods rubs off on them. It is therefore extremely important to the holy-men to keep the worshippers permanently obedient to the super-dominant figures, and they do this in several ways.

Desmond Morris
(1928-)
British scientist
Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behaviour
1977, Abrams, New York, pages 148-9

One of the demands put upon the priests and holy-men is that they should provide impressive rituals. Nearly all religions include ceremonial procedures during which the followers of a particular deity can indulge in complex group activities. This is essential as a demonstration of the power of the gods--that they can dominate and command submissive behavior from large numbers of people at one and the same time--and it is also a method of strengthening the social bonding in relation to the common belief. Since the gods are super-parents and super-leaders, they must necessarily have large houses in which to 'meet' with their followers. Anyone flying low over human settlements in a spacecraft and ignorant of our ways would notice immediately that in many of the villages and towns and cities there were one or two homes much bigger than the rest. Towering over the other houses, these large buildings must surely be the abodes of some enormous individuals, many times the size of the rest of the population. These--the houses of the gods--the temples, the churches and the cathedrals--are buildings apparently made for giants, and a space visitor would be surprised to find on closer examination that these giants are never at home. Their followers repeatedly visit them and bow down before them, but they themselves are invisible. Only their bell-like cries can be heard across the land. Man is indeed an imaginative species.

Desmond Morris
(1928-)
British scientist
"Religious Displays," _Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior_
1977, Abrams, New York, page 152.

The ministers, who preached at these revivals, were in earnest. They were zealous and sincere. They were not philosophers. To them science was the name of a vague dread -- a dangerous enemy. They did not know much, but they believed a great deal. -- from "Why I Am an Agnostic" The old lady who said there must be a devil, else how could they make pictures that looked exactly like him, reasoned like a trained theologian -- like a doctor of divinity. -- from "Superstition" Give me the storm and stress of thought and action rather than the dead calm of ignorance and faith. Banish me from Eden when you will but first let me eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Styles of sculpture, music, and dance used to vary greatly from village to village within New Guinea. Some villagers along the Sepik River and in the Asmat swamps produced carvings that are now world-famous because of their quality. But New Guinea villagers have been increasingly coerced or seduced into abandoning their artistic traditions. When I visited an isolated triblet of 578 people at Bomai in 1965, the missionary controlling the only store had just manipulated the people into burning all their art. Centuries of unique cultural development ("heathen artifacts," as the missionary put it) had thus been destroyed in one morning.

Jared Diamond
(1937-)
American scientist
The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal
1992, Harper Collins, New York, page 231

Men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.

Denis Diderot
(1712-1784)
French philosopher
"Dithyrambe sur la fete de rois"

Daniel: They have an afterworld of their own.
Father Laforgue: They have no concept of one.
Daniel: Annuka told me they believe that in the forest at night the dead can see. The souls of men hunt the souls of animals.
Father Laforgue: Is that what she told you? It is childish, Daniel.
Daniel: Is it harder to believe in than Paradise where we all sit on clouds and look at God?

Brian Moore
Irish-born Canadian writer
(1921-1999)
Black Robe

Religion offers us one of the cruelest spectacles: a human being living in fear and doubt being openly exploited to believe the impossible.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Afterdeath

One day my daughter asked me what happens when you die and I was like, I don't know and neither does anyone else; and anyone who tells you they know is lying.

Rory Scovel
(1980-)
American comedian

The questions of immortality of the soul and freedom of the will, though they have called forth libraries of controversial literature, continue to appear not only utterly beyond any possibility of satisfactory proof but, instead, trivial in being so definitely personal, once the principle of an all-pervading and ordering force is accepted. And the conception of a God so constituted that we are, as individuals, of direct concern to Him appears both presumptuous--considering our individual insignificance in the scheme as a whole--and unnecessary for that feeling of helpless reverence in face of the universal order which is the essence of religious experience. Moreover, paleontologically considered, one would have to assume that such a "personal" God existed long before the evolution of man. "Why did He wait so long to create man?" asked Diderot. Yet reward, punishment, immortality of the soul in the theological sense, could have no meaning whatever until there had developed creatures possessing nervous organization capable of abstract thinking and of spiritual suffering. One cannot imagine such a God occupied through millions of years, up to the Pleistocene, with personal supervision, reward and punishment, of amoebae, clams, fish, dinosaurs, and sabre-toothed tigers; then, suddenly, adjusting His own systems and purposes to the capacities of the man-ape He had allowed to develop.

Hans Zinsser
(1878-1940)
American scientist, writer

Thus that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist.

Epicurus
(341-270)
Greek philosopher

I’m certainly no physicist, but given what I've been told of what we know now I have to readily assume that the level of one's self-perceived state of existence a year after death is likely that of what it was the same amount of time prior to birth.

Scott Durkin
(1959-)
American educator

I'm a cognitive psychologist who takes a thoroughly naturalistic approach to the human mind. I believe

that the mind is a product of the brain. The brain is a product of evolution. There is no need to invoke an immaterial soul in understanding of how the mind works and therefore one of the traditional motivations for believing in a spiritual realm or a deity seems to be in the process of being undercut by the sciences of human nature such as neuroscience, evolution, and genetics.

Steven Pinker
(1954-)
Canadian-born American professor
50 Renowned Academics Speaking About God (Part 1)

I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.

Stephen Hawking
(1942-2018)
British physicist

In spite of all the yearnings of men, no one can produce a single fact or reason to support the belief in God and in personal immortality.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer

The man who is thoroughly convinced of the universal operation of the law of causation cannot for a moment entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events . . . He has no use for the religion of fear and equally little for social or moral religion. A God who rewards and punishes is inconceivable to him for the simple reason that a man's actions are determined by necessity, external and internal, so that in God's eyes he cannot be responsible, any more than an inanimate object is responsible for the motions it undergoes. Science has therefore been charged with undermining morality, but the charge is unjust. A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

It must require an inordinate share of vanity and presumption, too, after enjoying so much that is good and beautiful on earth, to ask the Lord for immortality in addition to it all.

Heinrich Heine
(1797-1856)
German writer

If there is sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.

Albert Camus
(1913-1960)
Algeria-born French writer

I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in human beings. Like Confucius of old, I am so absorbed in the wonder of earth and the life upon it that I cannot think of heaven and angels.

Pearl S. Buck
(1892-1973)
American writer

It is a strange and dismal thing that in a world of such need, such opportunity and such variety as ours, the search for an illusionary peace of mind should be so zealously pursued and defended, while the truth goes on languishing.

Karl Menninger
(1893-1990)
American psychiatrist

Men feverishly conceived a heaven only to find it insipid, and a hell to find it ridiculous.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

As for the Christian theology, can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven? What kind of deity is that would be capable of creating angels and men to sing his praises day and night to all eternity? It is, of course, the figure of the Oriental despot, with his inane and barbaric vanity. Such a conception is an insult to God.

Alfred North Whitehead
(1861-1947)
British mathematician, philosopher

The idea that a good God would send people to a burning Hell is utterly damnable to me. The ravings of insanity! Superstition gone to seed! I don't want to have anything to do with such a God. No avenging Jewish God, no satanic devil, no fiery hell is of any interest to me.

Luther Burbank
(1849-1926)
American horticulturist

Hell is an outrage to humanity. When you tell me that your Deity made you in his image, I reply that he must have been very ugly.

Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)
French writer

I do not believe that if there is a God of this vast universe that such a God would create a hell to torment to all eternity helpless and innocent human beings. I defend the God of religionists against the libels of his own believers.

Joseph Lewis
(1889-1968)
American atheist

On the basis of biological, sociological, and historical knowledge, we should recognize that the individual self is subject to death and decay, but the sum total of individual achievement, for better or worse, lives on in the immortality of the Larger Self; that to live for the sake of the species and posterity is religion of the highest kind; and that those religions which see a future life in either in Heaven or in the Pure Land, are selfish religions.

Hu Shih
(1891-1962)
Chinese scientist

Beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we shall allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity.

Fyodor Dostoyevski
(1821-1881)
Russian writer
The Brothers Karamazov, remark of the Grand Inquisitor
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

I have never seen the slightest scientific proof of the religious theories of heaven and hell, of future life for individuals, or of a personal God.

Thomas Edison
(1847-1931)
American inventor

The skeptic has no illusions about life, nor a vain belief in the promise of immortality. Since this life here and now is all we can know, our most reasonable option is to live it fully.

Paul Kurtz
(1925-2012)
American philosopher
The Transcendental Temptation (1986), preface
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Supernatural entities simply do not exist. This nonreality of the supernatural means, on the human level, that men do not possess supernatural and immortal souls; and, on the level of the universe as a whole, that our cosmos does not possess a supernatural and eternal God.

Corliss Lamont
The Philosophy of Humanism (1988), p. 116, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

In order to exist just once in the world, it is necessary never again to exist.

Albert Camus
(1913-1960)
Algeria-born French writer
The Rebel, pt. 4 (1951; tr. 1953), The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations

Nothing is greater than to break the chains from the bodies of men -- nothing nobler than to destroy the phantom of the soul.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

To himself every one is an immortal. He may know that he is going to die, but he can never know that he is dead.

Samuel Butler
(1835-1902)
English author
Samuel Butler's Notebooks (1951, p. 117)

We cannot avoid reality because we are afraid of the consequences of acknowledging facts.

Sarah Haider
(1991-)
American Pakistani-born writer

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.

James Arthur Baldwin
(1924-1987)
American writer
"Letter from a Region in My Mind," in New Yorker (17 Nov. 1962; repr. in The Fire Next Time, 1963).

After the survivor of the Spanish conquest has told his life's story he is convicted by the Inquisition:

He posted no brief in defense or mitigation of his offenses, and when he was most solemnly advised by the Court President of the dire consequences he faced if found guilty, Juan Damasceno volunteered only one comment:

'It will mean I do not go to the Christian heaven?'

He was told that would indeed be the worst of his punishments: that he would most assuredly not go to Heaven. At which, his smile sent a thrill of horror through every soul of the Court.

Gary Jennings
(1928-1999)
American writer
Aztec

....Man can contemplate his own mortality and finds the thought intolerable. Any animal will struggle to protect itself from a threat of death. Faced with a predator, it flees, hides, fights or employs some other defensive mechanism, such as death-feigning or the emission of stinking fluids. There are many self-protection mechanisms, but they all occur as a response to an immediate danger. When man contemplates his future death, it is as if, by thinking of it, he renders it immediate. His defense is to deny it. He cannot deny that his body will die and rot--the evidence is too strong for that; so he solves the problem by the invention of an immortal soul--a soul which is more 'him' than even his physical body is 'him.' If this soul can survive in an afterlife, then he has successfully defended himself against the threatened attack on his life.

This gives the agents of the gods a powerful area of support. All they need to do is to remind their followers constantly of their mortality and to convince them that the afterlife itself is under the personal

management of the particular gods they are promoting. The self-protective urges of their worshippers will do the rest.

Desmond Morris
(1928-)
British scientist
"Religious Displays," _Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behaviour_ 1977, Abrams, New York, p. 149-51.

"God" as traditionally defined is a systematic contradiction of every valid metaphysical principle. The point is wider than just the Judeo-Christian concept of God. No argument will get you from this world to a supernatural world. No reason will lead you to a world contradicting this one. No method of inference will enable you to leap from existence to a "super-existence."

Leonard Peikoff
(1933-)
Canadian American philosopher
"The Philosophy of Objectivism"

In theory it is still possible to be an orthodox religious believer without being intellectually crippled...; but it is far from easy, and in practice books by orthodox believers usually show the same cramped, blinkered outlook as books by orthodox Stalinists or others who are mentally unfree. The ... Christian churches still demand assent to doctrines which no one seriously believes in. The most obvious case is the immortality of the soul.

George Orwell
(1903-1950)
India-born British writer

Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher
"Why I Am Not a Christian"

I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

To believe that consciousness can survive the wreck of the brain is like believing that 70 mph can survive the wreck of the car.

Frank Zindler
(1939-)
American atheist

I don't know whether this world has a meaning which transcends it. But I do know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch - what resists me - that is what I understand. And these two certainties - my appetite for the absolute and for unity, and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle - I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?

Albert Camus
(1913-1960)
Algeria-born French writer
from The Myth of Sisyphus

I do not believe in revealed religion -- I will have nothing to do with your immortality; we are miserable enough in this life, without speculating on another....

Lord Byron
(1788-1824)
British poet
Letter to Rev. Francis Hodgson, 1811

The mystical trend of our time, which shows itself particularly in the rampant growth of the so-called Theosophy and Spiritualism, is for me no more than a symptom of weakness and confusion. Since our inner experiences consist of reproductions, and combinations of sensory impressions, the concept of a soul without a body seem to me to be empty and devoid of meaning.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I nor would I want to conceive of an individual that survives his

physical death; let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egoism, cherish such thoughts. I am satisfied with the mystery of the eternity of life and with the awareness and a glimpse of the marvelous structure of the existing world, together with the devoted striving to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
The World as I See It

I do not believe in immortality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern with no superhuman authority behind it.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
"Albert Einstein: The Human Side"
edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman,
and published by Princeton University Press.

Although I cannot believe that the individual survives the death of his body, feeble souls harbor such thought through fear or ridiculous egotism.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

Other world! There is no other world! Here or nowhere is the whole fact.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

The fact that millions of people still believe in a hell of eternal punishment for sinners and unbelievers is a drastic reminder of the need for persistent, progressive education of the masses. We have as yet only begun to realize the possibilities of progress. But science, rationalism and humanism have pointed the way, they have taken the first great steps, and we must keep right ahead on the highway of modernism.

E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Meaning Of Atheism"

Even many of those who claim to believe in immortality still tell themselves and others that neither side of the question is susceptible of proof. Just what can these hopeful ones believe that the word "proof" involves? The evidence against the persistence of personal consciousness is as strong as the evidence for gravitation, and much more obvious. It is as convincing and unassailable as the proof of the destruction of wood or coal by fire. If it is not certain that death ends personal identity and memory, then almost nothing that man accepts as true is susceptible as proof.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer
"The Myth of Immortality"

In the realm of science, all attempts to find any evidence of supernatural beings, of metaphysical conceptions, as God, immortality, infinity, etc., thus have failed, and if we are honest, we must confess that in science there exists no God, no immortality, no soul or mind as distinct from the body.

Charles P. Steinmetz
(1865-1923)
German-born, American engineer, inventor,
American Freeman, July 1941

The poor wretches have convinced themselves that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, by worshipping that crucified sophist and living under his laws...they receive these doctrines by tradition, without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan or trickster comes among them, he quickly acquires wealth by imposing upon these simple people.

Lucian
(c. 125-180)
Assyrian writer

The man who is always worrying about whether or not his soul would be damned generally has a soul that isn't worth a damn.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
(1809-1894)
American writer and physician

No man who ever lived knows any more about the hereafter ... than you and I; and all religion ... is simply evolved out of chicanery, fear, greed, imagination and poetry.

Edgar Allan Poe
(1809-1849)

American writer
from Rufus K. Noyes, Views of Religion also James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

What time has been wasted during man's destiny in the struggle to decide what man's next world will be like! The keener the effort to find out, the less he knew about the present one he lived in.

Sean O'Casey
(1884-1964)
Irish dramatist

I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation, whose purposes are modeled after our own- a God, in short, who is but a reflection of human frailty. Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body. Although feeble souls harbor such thoughts through fear or ridiculous egotisms.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

The rational attitude of a thinking mind toward the supernatural, whether in natural or revealed religion, is that of skepticism as distinguished from belief on one hand, and from atheism on the other . . . . The Notion of a providential government by an omnipotent Being for the good of his creatures must be entirely dismissed . . . . The possibility of life after death rests on the same footing- of a boon which this powerful Being who wishes well to man, may have the power to grant . . . . The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that simple Hope; and in that, for anything we can see, it is likely to always remain.

John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)
British economist, philosopher

The fact that there is a general belief in a future life is no evidence of its truth.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer

The absurdity of a religious practice may be clearly demonstrated without lessening the numbers of people who indulge in it.

Anatole France
(1844-1924)

French writer

If 50 million people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing.

Anatole France
(1844-1924)
French writer

"Eat shit. Three billion flies can't be wrong."

A small poster in my bedroom growing up in the 1970s - from National Lampoon.

... half of mankind is in denial about its stupidity.

Vilayanur Ramachandran
(1951-)
American Indian-born neuroscientist

I have little confidence in any enterprise or business or investment that promises dividends only after the death of the stockholders.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

In the presence of death I affirm and reaffirm the truth of all that I have said against the superstitions of the world. I would say that much on the subject with my last breath.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here. We privileged few, who won the lottery of birth against all odds, how dare we whine at our inevitable return to that prior state from which the vast majority have never stirred?

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder

Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened.

Theodor Seuss Geisel
(1904-1991)
American writer and cartoonist

Think of all the beauty that's still left in and around you, and be happy.

Anne Frank
(1929-1945)
German-born Dutch diarist and writer

Top

Harm

I suggest that the anthropomorphic god-idea is not a harmless infirmity of human thought, but a very noxious fallacy, which is largely responsible for the calamities the world is at present enduring.

William Archer
(1856-1924)
Scottish writer
Theology and War

Religion to me has always been the wound, not the bandage.

Dennis Potter
(1935-1994)
English writer

It is not disbelief that is dangerous in our society: it is belief. The moment it strikes you (as it may any day) that Christ is not the lifeless harmless image he has hitherto been to you, but a rallying center for the revolutionary influences which all established States and Churches fight, you must look to yourselves; for you have brought the image to life; and the mob may not be able to bear that horror.

George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950)
Irish dramatist

Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything

Whenever morality is based on theology, wherever right is made dependent on divine authority, the most immoral, unjust, infamous things can be justified and established.

Ludwig Feuerbach
(1804-1872)
German philosopher

As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

Belief in a cruel God makes a cruel man.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)
English staymaker, American patriot

Toward no crimes have men shown themselves so cold-bloodedly cruel as in punishing differences of belief.

James Russell Lowell
(1819-1891)
American writer, diplomat
Literary Essays, Witchcraft

So long as there are earnest believers in the world, they will always wish to punish opinions, even if their judgement tells them it is unwise and their conscience that it is wrong.

Walter Bagehot
(1826-1877)
English economist, writer

Christianity, above all, consoles; but there are naturally happy souls who do not need consolation. Consequently, Christianity begins by making such souls unhappy, for otherwise it would have no power over them.

Andre Gide
(1869-1951)
French novelist

I would never want to be a member of a group whose symbol was a guy nailed to two pieces of wood. I credit that eight years of grammar school with nourishing me in a direction where I could trust myself and trust my instincts. They gave me the tools to reject my faith. They taught me to question and think for myself and to believe in my instincts to such an extent that I just said, "This is a wonderful fairy tale they have going here, but it's not for me."

George Carlin
(1937-2008)
American satirist
New York Times, August 20, 1995

So, when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, if you go for all these fairy tales, that "evil" woman convinced the man to eat the apple, but the apple came from the Tree of Knowledge. And the punishment that was then handed down, the woman gets to bleed and the guy's got to go to work, is the result of a man desiring, because his woman suggested that it would be a good idea, that he get all the knowledge that was supposedly the property and domain of God. So, that right away sets up Christianity as an anti-intellectual religion. You never want to be that smart. If you're a woman, it's going to be running down your leg, and if you're a guy, you're going to be in the salt mines for the rest of your life. So, just be a dumb fuck and you'll all go to heaven. That's the subtext of Christianity.

Frank Zappa
(1940-1993)
American musician and composer

... the Protestant religion, in all its different creeds, is a mild mixture compared to what it was seventy years ago. And perhaps for the reason that its hideousness is so nicely covered, there is more need that Liberals be on the alert. Christianity is the more dangerous when it gives its attention to this life. Christianity demands entire subordination to its edicts, no matter that it keeps out of sight the damnation of infants in another world, if it subjugates all children to its decrees by teaching them, not only in Sunday-schools but in public schools supported by the public at large, the doctrines taught in the Bible. Until the majority of the people are emancipated from authority over their minds, we are not safe.

Lucy Colman
(1817-1906)
American abolitionist and freethinker
Reminiscences, P. 7, quoted in American Atheist Magazine, Spring, 1997

I do not know which is the more dangerous to liberty -- Romanism or Protestantism. Either is fatal if it predominates. Parochial schools are a menace, and the Bible in schools is an insult. Our Sunday-schools are very mischievous. Which is most to be feared I cannot tell. We need to use great diligence as Freethinkers lest we find ourselves imprisoned or even executed for expression of opinion.

Lucy Colman
(1817-1906)
American abolitionist and freethinker
The Truth Seeker Annual and Freethinkers' Almanac, New York, Truth Seeker Office, 1889, quoted in American Atheist Magazine, Spring, 1997

I wish to be just to all, but the Christian church, with its religion, seems to me a blot upon civilization.
--reply to the question, "What is your opinion of the Christian religion and the Christian church?"

Lucy Colman
(1817-1906)

American abolitionist and freethinker from The Truth Seeker Annual and Freethinkers' Almanac, New York, Truth Seeker Office, 1889, quoted in American Atheist Magazine, Spring, 1997

The idea of god implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind both in theory and practice.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

A divine revelation must necessarily be intolerant of contradiction; it must repudiate all improvement in itself, and view with disdain that arising from the progressive intellectual development of man.

John William Draper
(1811-1882)
British-born American scientist
History of the Conflict between Religion and Science, Preface (1910 edition)

The careful student of history will discover that Christianity has been of very little value in advancing civilization, but has done a great deal toward retarding it.

Matilda Joslyn Gage
(1826-1898)
American author, activist
"Woman, Church and State"

Religion is all profit. They have no merchandise to buy, no commissions to pay, and no refunds to make for unsatisfactory service and results.... Their commodity is fear. They blackmail their parishioners with threats of hell and damnation. These poor deluded people give them their hard earned money to save them from a hell that does not exist, and from eternal torment that was invented by the perverted minds of priests to rob the living and in addition, they are exempt from taxation! Insult to injury! Let me tell you that religion is the cruelest fraud ever perpetrated upon the human race. It is the last of the great scheme of thievery that man must legally prohibit so as to protect himself from the charlatans who prey upon the ignorance and fears of the people. The penalty for this type of extortion should be as severe as it is of other forms of dishonesty.

Joseph Lewis
(1889-1968)
American atheist
"Ingersoll the Magnificent"

You know what they ought to do with churches? Tax them! If holy people are so interested in politics, government, and public policy, let them pay the price of admission like everyone else. The Catholic Church alone could wipe out the national debt if all you did was tax their real estate.

George Carlin
(1937-2008)
American satirist

The priesthoods of whatever stripe can never live down, nor make amends for, their disgraceful role in retarding the development of modem science during the past millennium in Christendom.... Supernaturalism is, in its social functions and consequences, a dangerous opiate. And, what is perhaps even worse, it discourages objective attempts at intelligent social trial-and-error, planning, and even research, and undermines man's faith in his own resources.

George B. Vetter
Magic and Religion, 1973

The worst criminals are not half so immoral as the creators and perpetrators of the unquestionable hell of Christian theology.
M.M. Mangasarian
(1859-1943)
American secularist
Morality Without God, 1913

If anyone can show me, and prove to me, that I am wrong in thought or deed, I will gladly change. I seek the truth, which never yet hurt anybody. It is only persistence in self-delusion and ignorance which does harm.

Marcus Aurelius Antonious
(121-180)
Roman Emperor, philosopher

The question of the truth of a religion is one thing, but the question of its usefulness is another. I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher
Why I Am Not A Christian, 1957

There has been a rumor in recent years to the effect that I have become less opposed to religious orthodoxy than I formerly was. This rumor is totally without foundation. I think all the great religions of the world- Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism- both untrue and harmful.

Bertrand Russell
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher
1957

God says do what you wish, but make the wrong choice and you will be tortured for eternity in hell. That sir, is not free will. It would be akin to a man telling his girlfriend, do what you wish, but if you choose to leave me, I will track you down and blow your brains out. When a man says this we call him a psychopath and cry out for his imprisonment/execution. When god says the same we call him "loving" and build churches in his honor.

William C. Easttom II
skeptic@icon.net

...a doctrine which is able to maintain itself not in clear light but only in the dark, will of necessity lose its effect on mankind, with incalculable harm to human progress. In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests.... The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
address at the Princeton Theological Seminary, May 19, 1939
published in _Out of My Later Years_, New York: Philosophical Library, 1950

Man makes himself, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacrilizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.

Mircea Eliade
(1907-1986)
Romanian-born American professor

All in all, I can't say I believe in god. If, in fact, I ever find out that he does indeed exist, I think I'll stay away from him, because if he's responsible for half the things he gets credit for, he's got to be one mean son of a bitch.
Peter Gethers
(1955-)
American writer
A Cat Abroad, pp. 89-90

Imagine encouraging [a child] to participate in such 'twisted' rituals and worshiping of tortuous crucifixes and such like this from birth. No wonder we have so many hateful and sadistic people in our society.
Brent Allsop
10-27-95 (news:alt.atheism)

You've got to put in your pew time and come by your disdain for religion honestly, like us.
Doonesbury cartoon

The liberation of man depends neither on God nor the nonexistence of God. It is not the idea of God which has been obstacle to human liberation, but the use that has been made of the idea of God.
Herbert Marcuse
(1898-1979)
German-born American philosopher

The more a man is imbued with the ordered regularity of all events the firmer becomes his conviction that there is no room left by the side of this ordered regularity for causes of a different nature. For him neither the rule of human nor the rule of divine will exists as an independent cause of natural events. To be sure, the doctrine of a personal God interfering with natural events could never be refuted, in the real sense, by science, for this doctrine can always take refuge in those domains in which scientific knowledge has not yet been able to set foot. But I am convinced that such behavior on the part of representatives of religion would not only be unworthy but also fatal. For a doctrine which is to maintain itself not in clear light but only in the dark, will of necessity lose its effect on mankind, with incalculable harm to human progress. In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests. In their labors they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in humanity itself. This is, to be sure a more difficult but an incomparably more worthy task...
Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
"Science, Philosophy, and Religion, A Symposium"
published by the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc., New York, 1941

Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning.
Bill Gates
(1955-)
American businessman, software engineer

Who can overestimate the progress of the world if all the money wasted in superstition could be used to enlighten, elevate and civilize mankind?
Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Even if nothing worse than wasted mental effort could be laid to the charge of theology, that alone ought to be sufficient to banish it from the earth, as one of the worst enemies of mankind.
Lydia Maria Child
(1802-1880)
Abolitionist, author

The Progress of Ideas Through Successive Ages, from Annie Laurie Gaylor, ed., Women Without Superstition: "No Gods -- "No Masters"

Now, I am absolutely convinced that the main source of hatred in the world is religion and organized religion. Absolutely convinced of that. And I think it should be - religion - treated with ridicule, hatred, and contempt. And I claim that right. ... So when I say that I think Religion Poisons Everything, I'm not just doing what publishers like and coming up with a provocative subtitle. I mean to say that it infects us in our most basic integrity. It says we can't be moral without "Big Brother" - without a totalitarian permission. It means we can't be good to one another without this. We must be afraid. We must also be forced to love someone whom we fear - the essence of sadomasochism, the essence of abjection, the essence of the master-slave relationship. And that it knows that death is coming, and can't wait to bring it on. I say that is evil. And that I do some nights stay home. I enjoy more the nights I go out and fight this ultimate wickedness and ultimate stupidity.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
Public lectures

Why can't I leave religion alone?

Because it storms its way into my children's schools, it weasels its way into my government, and its followers demand I can't do what I want with my own body. Right now people are being tortured, beaten, raped, and murdered in the name of religion. Is that enough?

Allie Jackson
()
American writer

You don't get to advertise all the good that your religion does without first scrupulously subtracting all the harm it does and considering seriously the question of whether some other religion, or no religion at all, does better.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher

Top

Women

This section should be longer than it currently is. Help. It is rather obvious that in most religions women (save for key religious figures) in general have been historically viewed somewhat as a sub-species.

We were taught to fear the witches instead of the ones who burned them, and I think that is the problem.

Feminist News

The religious superstitions of women perpetuate their bondage more than all other adverse influences.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
(1815-1902)
American reformer

I write against the religion because if women want to live like human beings, they will have to live outside the religion and Islamic law.

Taslima Nasreen
(1962-)
Bangladeshi author
in exile, 6/21/94

Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote. The relative positions to be assumed by man and woman in the working out of our civilization were assigned long ago by a higher intelligence than ours.

Grover Cleveland
(1837-1908)
22nd and 24th President of the United States
1905

It will yet be the proud boast of women that they never contributed a line to the Bible.

George W. Foote
(1850-1915)
British secularist

The natural superiority of women is a biological fact and a socially acknowledged reality.
Ashley Montagu
(1905-1999)
American British-born anthropologist

The whole tone of Church teaching in regard to women is, to the last degree, contemptuous and degrading.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
(1815-1902)
American reformer

The bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire . . . Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
(1815-1902)
American reformer

One of my favorite fantasies is that next Sunday not one single woman, in any country of the world, will go to church. If women simply stop giving our time and energy to the institutions that oppress, they could cease to be.

Sonia Johnson
(1936-)
American writer and activist

The cure for poverty has a name: it's called The Empowerment of Women. Now, name me a religion that stands, or has ever stood, for that...

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal. God is the Omnipotent Father, hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates.

Gore Vidal
(1925-2012)
American writer

We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.

Malala Yousafzai
(1997-)
Pakistani activist

If I am to be subjected to a god, I just as soon it be chthonic - one of the Earth/Ea (female) - or as Shaw put it in Maxiums for Revolutionists, "Beware of the man whose God is in the skies."

Scott Durkin
(1959-)
American educator

Top

Children/Education

Religion is the masterpiece of the art of animal training, for it trains people as to how they shall think.

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)
German philosopher

We are tattooed in our cradles with the beliefs of our tribe; the record may seem superficial, but it is indelible. You cannot educate a man wholly out of the superstitious fears which were implanted in his imagination, no matter how utterly his reason may reject them.
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
(1809-1894)
American writer and physician

Religion...can exercise a severe crippling and inhibiting effect upon the human mind, by fostering irrational anxiety and guilt, and by hampering the free play of the intellect.

J. C. Flügel
(1884-1955)
British psychologist

Perhaps it is not without reason that we attribute facility in belief and conviction to simplicity and ignorance; for it seems to me I once learned that belief was a sort of impression made on our mind, and that the softer and less resistant the mind, the easier it was to imprint something on it.

Michel Eyquen de Montaigne
(1533-1592)
French philosopher

There is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if only you begin to inculcate it before the age of five, by constantly repeating it with an air of great solemnity.

No child under the age of fifteen should receive instruction in subjects which may be possibly be the vehicle of serious error, such as philosophy or religion, for wrong notions imbibed early can seldom be rooted out, and all of the intellectual faculties, judgement is the last to arrive at maturity.

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)
German philosopher

Scientific education and religious education are incompatible. The clergy have ceased to interfere with education at the advanced state, with which I am directly concerned, but they still got control of the

children. This means that the children have to learn about Adam and Noah instead of evolution; about David who killed Goliath, instead of Koch who killed cholera; about Christ's ascent into heaven instead of Montgolfier's and Wright's. Worse than that, they are taught that it is a virtue to accept statements without adequate evidence, which leaves them a prey to quacks of every kind in later life, and makes it very difficult for them to accept the methods of thought which are successful in science.

J. B. S. Haldane
(1892-1964)
British scientist

Had it not been a law of nature, that any impression, however ridiculous and absurd, and however contrary to the fact, may be given in infancy, so as to be tenaciously retained through life, men could have not passed the previous ages of the world without discovering the gross errors in which they have been trained.

Robert Owen
(1771-1858)
Welsh social reformer

My best advice to anyone who wants to raise a happy, mentally healthy child is: KEEP HIM OR HER AS FAR AWAY FROM A CHURCH AS YOU CAN.

Frank Zappa
(1940-1993)
American musician and composer

Prayer has no place in the public schools just like facts have no place in organized religion.

School Superintendent on "The Simpsons" (paraphrased)

The public schools of this country serve the admirable function of bringing together on common ground students from a diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds. The introduction of public prayer into such a setting jeopardizes the sense of community and unnecessarily intrudes an emotional and divisive factor.

Rabbi Daniel Polish
(1942-)
American writer
Testimony on behalf of the Synagogue Council of America September 8, 1980, U.S. House of Representatives
Quoted from Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Francis Bellamy
(1855-1931)
American minister
1892

Would you sing 'Krishna Bless America' or pledge allegiance to 'One nation under Allah'? If not, would that make you unpatriotic?

Chris Lee

Just think of the tragedy of teaching children not to doubt.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer

It (modern philosophy) certainly exacts a surrender of all supernaturalism and fixed dogma and rigid institutionalism with which Christianity has been historically associated.

John Dewey
(1859-1952)
American philosopher, educator

Already the spirit of our schooling is permeated with the feeling that every subject, every topic, every fact, every professed truth must be submitted to a certain publicity and impartiality. All proffered samples of learning must go to the same assay-room and be subjected to common tests. It is the essence of all dogmatic faiths to hold that any such "show-down" is sacrilegious and perverse. The characteristic of religion, from their point of view, is that it is intellectually secret, not public; peculiarly revealed, not generally known; authoritatively declared, not communicated and tested in ordinary ways...It is pertinent to point out that, as long as religion is conceived as it is now by the great majority of professed religionists, there is something self-contradictory in speaking of education in religion in the same sense in which we speak of education in topics where the method of free inquiry has made its way. The "religious" would be the last to be willing that either the history or the content of religion should be taught in this spirit; while those to whom the scientific standpoint is not merely a technical device, but is the embodiment of the integrity of mind, must protest against its being taught in any other spirit.

John Dewey
(1859-1952)
American philosopher, educator
"Democracy in the Schools", 1908

I do not believe that any type of religion should ever be introduced into the public schools of the United States.

Thomas Edison
(1847-1931)
American inventor

The Santa myth is one of the most effective means ever devised for intimidating children, eroding their self-esteem, twisting their behavior, warping their values, and slowing their development of critical thinking skills.

Tom Flynn
(1955-)
American writer
The Trouble with Christmas

Creation science has not entered the curriculum for a reason so simple and so basic that we often forget to mention it: because it is false, and because good teachers understand exactly why it is false. What could be more destructive of that most fragile yet most precious commodity in our entire intellectual heritage -- good teaching -- than a bill forcing honorable teachers to sully their sacred trust by granting equal treatment to a doctrine not only known to be false, but calculated to undermine any general understanding of science as an enterprise?

Stephen Jay Gould
(1941-2002)
American scientist
"The Skeptical Inquirer"

The argument that the literal story of Genesis can qualify as science collapses on three major grounds: the creationists' need to invoke miracles in order to compress the events of the earth's history into the biblical span of a few thousand years; their unwillingness to abandon claims clearly disproved, including the assertion that all fossils are products of Noah's flood; and their reliance upon distortion, misquote, half-quote, and citation out of context to characterize the ideas of their opponents.

Stephen Jay Gould
(1941-2002)
American scientist
"The Verdict on Creationism", The Skeptical Inquirer, Winter 87/88, pg. 186

In science, "fact" can only mean "confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional assent." I suppose that apples might start to rise tomorrow, but the possibility does not merit equal time in physics classrooms.

Stephen Jay Gould
(1941-2002)
American scientist

Do not feed children on maudlin sentimentalism or dogmatic religion; give them nature.

Luther Burbank
(1849-1926)
American horticulturist

It is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are atheists and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so.

Ernestine Rose
(1810-1892)
American reformist

If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in quite a different world.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Beliefs, including religious ones, are learned. Which makes atheism a normal state of affairs and religious beliefs a learned 'abnormality.' No psychological theory is necessary to explain the causes of a normal base state. Any psychological theory of learning, attitude change or socialisation can explain the causes of religious belief.

Rosemary Lyndall
()
American psychologist

Two recent surveys rate the United States at the top among Western nations in belief in God and at the bottom among six major countries in school kids' understanding of science and math. This could be dismissed as chance, but it shouldn't be. While our economic competitors' schools are teaching students advanced math and science, many of our schools are wasting energy debating whether to teach evolution or creationism, which maintains that God created the universe over a six-day period about 6,000 years ago.

Bill Mandel
(1917-2016)

American journalist
San Francisco Examiner, 12 February 1989

The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)
German philosopher
"The Dawn" (1881)

The great trouble is that the preachers get the children from six to seven years of age and then it is almost impossible to do anything with them.

Thomas Edison
(1847-1931)
American inventor
quoted by Joseph Lewis from a personal conversation,
A Visit With Thomas Alva Edison in the Positive Atheism Historical Index under Joseph Lewis on Freethought Heroes

If you think that your belief is based upon reason, you will support it by argument, rather than by persecution, and will abandon it if the argument goes against you. But if your belief is based on faith, you will realize that argument is useless, and will therefore resort to force either in the form of persecution or by stunting and distorting the minds of the young in what is called "education". This last is particularly dastardly, since it takes advantage of the defenselessness of immature minds.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain")
(1835-1910)
American writer

Education is an admirable thing, but nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)
Irish writer

Bodily exercise, when compulsory, does no harm to the body; but knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind.

Plato
(c. 425-c. 348)
Greek philosopher
The Republic

True knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing.

Socrates
(c. 469-399)
Greek philosopher

Knowledge is knowing that we cannot know.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

A man doesn't know what he knows until he knows what he doesn't know.

Laurence Peter
(1919-1990)
Canadian educator

Those who think they know, don't. Those who know they don't know, know.

found in Sanskrit
from Joseph Campbell - The Power of Myth

The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you.
B.B. King
(1925-2015)
American musician

It is scandalous that any modern, intelligent, well-educated person should believe in Christianity.
Delos B. McKown
American professor

... hard work dissipates ignorance. ... The measure of whether you learn something is not whether is was obviously true to you upon first glance.

Neil deGrasse Tyson
(1958-)
American astrophysicist
verbally sharing life lessons acquired in high school while overcoming the initial hurdle of grasping the fundamentals of calculus

Top

Doubt/Free-thinking/Truth

God have mercy on the man
Who doubts what's he's sure of

Bruce Springsteen
(1949-)
American musician and poet

In one age the persecutor burned the heretic; in another, he crushed him with penal laws; in a third, he withheld from him places of emolument and dignity; in a fourth, he subjected him to excommunication of society. Each stage of advancing toleration marks a stage of decline of dogmatism and of the increase of the spirit of truth.

William E. H. Lecky
(1838-1903)
Irish historian

I give instruction concerning mighty things and proceed to free the mind from the closely-confining shackles of religion.

Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus)
(c. 99-c. 55)
Roman poet

God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please; you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. He in whom the love of repose predominates will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets- most likely his father's. He gets rest, commodity, and reputation; but he shuts the door of truth. He whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations between which, as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconveniences of suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth, as the other is not, and respects the highest law of his being.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments, of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue, are complete skeptics in religion.
John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)
British economist, philosopher

At the time of its Founding, the United States seemed to be an infertile ground for religion. Many of the nation's leaders - including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin - were not Christians, did not accept the authority of the Bible, and were hostile to organized religion. The attitude of the general public was one of apathy: in 1776, only 5 percent of the population were participating members of churches.
Ian Robertson
(1951-)
Irish psychologist
Sociology, 3rd ed., Worth Publishing Inc.: New York, 1987, page 410]

It can do truth no service to blink the fact, known to all who have the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history, that a large portion of the noblest and most valuable teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected, the Christian faith.
John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)
British economist, philosopher

The history of the rise of Christianity has everything to do with politics, culture, and human frailties and nothing to do with supernatural manipulation of events. Had divine intervention been the guiding force, surely two millennia after the birth of Jesus he would not have a world where there are more Muslims than Catholics, more Hindus than Protestants, and more nontheists than Catholics and Protestants combined.
John K. Naland
"The First Easter", Free Inquiry magazine, Vol. 8, No. 2

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The bystanders look askance of him in the public street or in the friend's parlor. If this aversion had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own he might well go home with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs.
Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

Religious apologists complain bitterly that atheists and secularists are aggressive and hostile in their criticism of them. I always say: look, when you guys were in charge, and you didn't argue with us, you just burnt us at the stake. Now what we're doing is, we're presenting you with some arguments and some challenging questions, and you complain.

A.C. Grayling
(1949-)
British philosopher

If someone tells me that I've hurt their feelings, I'm still waiting to hear what your point is.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

I listen to all these complaints about rudeness and intemperateness, and the opinion that I come to is that there is no polite way of asking somebody: "Have you considered the possibility that your entire life has been devoted to a delusion?" But that's a good question to ask. Of course, we should ask that question and of course, it's going to offend people. Tough.
Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher

Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but is essential for free thinking; where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless.
Count Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy
(1828-1910)
Russian writer

If you would be a real seeker of truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.
Rene Descartes
(1596-1650)
French philosopher

A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.

Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)
English philosopher

It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.

Eugène Ionesco
(1909-1994)
Romanian playwright

If he is infinitely good, what reason should we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we have doubts concerning our future? If he knows all, why warn him of our needs and fatigue him with our prayers? If he is everywhere, why erect temples to him?
Percy Bysshe Shelley
(1792-1822)
British poet

To doubt has more of faith, even to disbelieve, than that blank negation of all such thoughts and feelings which is the lot of the herd of church-and-meeting trotters.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1772-1834)
English poet

The majority of mankind is lazy-minded, incurious, absorbed in vanities, and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of much doubt.
T. S. Elliot
(1888-1965)
American-born English poet

Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth- more than death. Thought is subversive, and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits; thought is anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, careless to the well-tried wisdom of the ages. Thought looks into the pit of hell and is not afraid . . . Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man.
But if thought is to become the possession of the many, and not the privilege of the few, we must have done with fear. It is fear that holds men back- fear that their cherished beliefs should prove delusions, fear lest the institutions by which they live should prove harmful, fear lest they themselves prove less worthy to the respect then they have supposed themselves to be.
Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

If you have a fresh view or an original idea you will surprise the reader. And the reader doesn't like being surprised. He never looks into history for anything but the stupidities he knows already. If you try to instruct him, you only humiliate him and make him angry. Do not try to enlighten him. He will only cry out that you insult his beliefs.
Anatole France
(1844-1924)
French writer

Human beings never welcome the news that something they have long cherished is untrue: they almost always reply to that news by reviling its promulgator.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

I always think it is a sign of victory when they move on to the ad hominem.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Beware how you take away hope from another human being.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
(1809-1894)
American writer and physician

If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh. Otherwise, they'll kill you.

Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)
Irish writer

In the case of fundamentalist beliefs, people expect that choosing to leave a childhood faith is like giving up Santa Claus - a little sad but basically a matter of growing up. But religious indoctrination can be hugely damaging, and making the break from an authoritarian kind of religion can definitely be traumatic. It involves a complete upheaval of a person's construction of reality, including the self, other people, life, the future, everything. People unfamiliar with it, including therapists, have trouble appreciating the sheer terror it can create and the recovery needed.

Marlene Winell
()
American writer

The vast majority of persons of our race have a natural tendency to shrink from the responsibility of standing and acting alone. They exalt the *vox populi*, even when they know it to be the utterance of a mob of nobodies, into the *vox dei*, and they are willing slave to tradition, authority, and custom. This hereditary taint, due to the primeval barbarism of our race, and maintained by later influences, will have to be bred out of it before our descendants can rise to the position of free members of an intelligent society.

Sir Francis Galton
(1822-1911)
British polymath

Who knows most, doubts most.
Robert Browning
(1812-1889)
British poet

Strictly speaking, you only know when you know little. Doubt grows with knowledge.
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749-1832)
German philosopher

The most pernicious of absurdities is that weak, blind, stupid faith is better than the constant practice of every human virtue.
Walter Savage Landor
(1775-1864)
British writer
Cardiff, What Great Men Think of Religion

To discriminate against a thoroughly upright citizen because he belongs to some particular church, or because, like Abraham Lincoln, he has not avowed his allegiance to any church, is an outrage against that liberty of conscience which is one of the foundations of American life.
Theodore Roosevelt
(1858-1919)
26th president of the United States
Letter to J. C. Martin, November 9, 1908, from Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom

I prefer tongue-tied knowledge to ignorant loquacity.
Cicero [Marcus Tullius]
(106-43)
Roman orator, philosopher
-- De Oratore, bk. 3, sct. 142

If I am fool, it is, at least, a doubting one; and I envy no one the certainty of his self-approved wisdom.
Lord Byron
(1788-1824)
British poet
George Gordon Noel Byron [Sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale]
-- Byron's Letters and Journals, vol. 3 (1974), entry for 27 Nov. 1813

I think that Richard Nixon will go down in history as a true folk hero, who struck a vital blow to the whole diseased concept of the revered image and gave the American virtue of irreverence and skepticism back to the people.
William Seward Burroughs
(1914-1997)
American writer
The Adding Machine, "A Word to the Wise Guy" (1985)

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.
Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)
English philosopher
Advancement of Learning

. . . doubt is what gives you an education.
Wilson Mizner
(1876-1933)

American writer

I call him free who is led solely by reason.

Baruch Spinoza
(1632-1677)
Dutch philosopher

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.

Alfred, 1st Lord Tennyson
(1809-1892)
British poet

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

I slept with Faith, and found a corpse in my arms on awaking; I drank and danced all night with Doubt, and found her a virgin in the morning.

Aleister Crowley
British occultist
(1875-1947)
The Book of Lies

You see, one thing is, I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it's much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of uncertainty about different things, but I am not absolutely sure of anything and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here... I don't have to know an answer. I don't feel frightened not knowing things, by being lost in a mysterious universe without any purpose, which is the way it really is as far as I can tell. It doesn't frighten me.

Richard P. Feynman
(1918-1988)
American physicist

The most fatal blow to progress is slavery of the intellect. The most sacred right of humanity is the right to think, and next to the right to think is the right to express that thought without fear.

Helen H. Gardner
(1853-1925)
American writer
Men, Women and Gods

It is a common saying that thought is free. A man can never be hindered from thinking whatever he chooses so long as he conceals what he thinks. The working of his mind is limited only by the bounds of his experience and the power of his imagination. But this natural liberty of private thinking is of little value. It is unsatisfactory and even painful to the thinker himself, if he is not permitted to communicate his thoughts to others, and it is obviously of no value to his neighbors. Moreover it is extremely difficult to hide thoughts that have any power over the mind. If a man's thinking leads him to call in question ideas and customs which regulate the behavior of those about him, to reject the beliefs which they hold, to see better ways of life than those they follow, it is almost impossible for him, if he is convinced of the truth of his own reasoning, not to betray by silence, chance words, or general attitude that he is different from them and does not share their opinions. Some have preferred, like Socrates, some would prefer today, to face death rather than conceal their thoughts. Thus freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes freedom of speech.

J.B. Bury
(1861-1927)
Irish scholar
"A History of Freedom of Thought", 1913

The believer is happy; the doubter is wise.

Hungarian proverb

The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality.

George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950)
Irish dramatist

A believer is a bird in a cage, a free-thinker is an eagle parting the clouds with tireless wing.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Birds born in a cage think flying is an illness.

Alejandro Jodorowsky

(1929-)
Chilean-born French actor and related professions

Men become civilized not in proportion to their willingness to believe but in proportion to their readiness to doubt.

H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

Every judgment teeters on the brink of error. To claim absolute knowledge is to become monstrous. Knowledge is an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty.

Frank Herbert
(1920-1986)
American writer
June, 1965, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Questions are like cancer to religion.

Jim Jeffries
(1977-)
Australian comedian

Top

Slay the Beast

It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but, if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher

Religions do not disappear when they are discredited; it is requisite that they should be replaced.

George Santayana
(1863-1952)
American Spanish-born philosopher

The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it- the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one.

Eugene O'Neill
(1888-1953)
American dramatist

The pursuit of happiness belongs to us, but we must climb around the church to get it.

Heywood Broun
(1888-1939)
American journalist

You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized by its churches, has been and still is, the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

The solution . . . would seem to lie in dismantling the theistic edifice, which no longer bear the weight of the universe as enlarged by recent science, and attempting to find new outlets for the religious spirit. God, in any but a purely philosophical, and one is almost tempted to say Pickwickian sense, turns out to be a

product of the human mind. As an independent or unitary being active in the affairs of the universe, he does not exist.

Julian Huxley
(1887-1975)
British biologist, writer

The arguments for God's existence have stood for hundreds of years with the waves of unbelieving criticism breaking against them, never totally discrediting them in the ears of the faithful, but on the whole slowly and surely washing out the mortar from between the joints.

William James
(1842-1910)
American philosopher, psychologist

If the Christian religion, as I understand it, or as you understand it, should maintain its ground, as I believe it will, yet Platonic, Pythagoric, Hindoo, and cabalistical Christianity, which is Catholic Christianity, and which has prevailed for 1500 years, has received a mortal wound, of which the monster must finally die. Yet so strong is his constitution, that he may endure for centuries before he expires.

John Adams
(1735-1826)
Second President of the United States

God is dead: but considering the state Man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)
German philosopher

The Christian religion grew upon a soil of such utter falsification, where the deepest instincts of the ruling factions were opposed to nature and natural values to such an extent, that Christianity became a death struggle against reality which has never been surpassed.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)
German philosopher

Religion, you say, has produced countless misfortunes; say rather the superstition which reigns on our unhappy globe. This is the cruelest enemy of the pure worship due the Supreme Being. Let us detest this monster which has always torn the bosom of its mother; those who combat it are the benefactors of the

human race; it is a serpent which chokes religion in its embrace; we must crush its head without wounding the mother whom it devours.

Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)
(1694-1778)
French philosopher

God, or rather the fiction of God, is thus the sanction and the intellectual and moral cause of all the slavery on earth, and the liberty of men will not be complete, unless it will have completely annihilated the inauspicious fiction of a heavenly master.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer
Oeuvres, vol. 1, p. 143
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

The first revolt is against the supreme tyranny of theology, of the phantom of God. As long as we have a master in heaven, we will be slaves on earth.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer
God and the State

Religion is too important a matter to its devotees to be a subject of ridicule. If they indulge in absurdities, they are to be pitied rather than ridiculed.

Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)
German philosopher
lecture at Konigsberg, 1775,
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions.

Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)
Third President of the United States

Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)
German philosopher

In some ways I feel sorry for racists and religious fanatics, because they so much miss the point of being human, and deserve a sort of pity. But then I harden my heart, and decide to hate them all the more, because of the misery they inflict and because of the contemptible excuses they advance for doing so.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
Letters to a Young Contrarian

Christianity was a great religion. It has been over for a hundred years now; whatever the twentieth century knows of it can be thought of as a lingering unreality preserved in the church. When something even so small as a lightbulb goes out, the eyes for a moment still see it; and a sound after it is made will have, in the right places, an echo. So it is not at all strange that when something so huge as a world religion goes out, there remains for a century or more in certain places some notion that it is still there.

Mary Jean Irion
(1924-2019)
From the Ashes of Christianity, 1968
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar. They offer consolation and solidarity and uplift, competing as they do in a marketplace. But we have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse. And if we chance to forget what that must have been like, we have only to look to those states and societies where the clergy still has the power to dictate its own terms. The pathetic vestiges of this can still be seen, in modern societies, in the efforts made by religion to secure control over education, or to exempt itself from tax, or to pass laws forbidding people to insult its omnipotent and omniscient deity, or even his prophet.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything

Secular humanism does not have the essential attributes of a religion: belief in a deity, the wish for some sort of afterlife, "sacred" dogma or texts, or an absolutist moral creed. Instead, it expresses a philosophical and ethical point of view, and it draws upon the scientific method in formulating its naturalistic view of nature.

Paul Kurtz
(1925-2012)
American philosopher
with Tim Madigan, "Eupraxophy and Secular Humanism", Free Inquiry

While the different religions wrangle with one another as to which of them is in possession of the truth, in our view the truth of religion may be altogether disregarded...if one attempts to assign religion it's place in man's evolution, it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist

After all, the principle objection which a thinking man has to religion is that religion is not true -- and is not even sane.

E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Meaning Of Atheism"

The kindly God who lovingly fashioned each and every one of us and sprinkled the sky with shining stars for our delight -- that God is, like Santa Claus, a myth of childhood, not anything a sane, undeluded adult could literally believe in. That God must either be turned into a symbol for something less concrete or abandoned altogether.

Daniel Dennett
(1942-2024)
American philosopher
"Darwin's Dangerous Idea", p. 18

Rough work, iconoclasm, but the only way to get at truth.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
(1809-1894)
American writer and physician
1860

Organized Religion is like Organized Crime; it preys on peoples' weakness, generates huge profits for its operators, and is almost impossible to eradicate.

Mike Hermann
(hermann@cs.ubc.ca)

We need men with moral courage to speak and write their real thoughts, and to stand by their convictions, even to the very death.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker
"Thomas Paine"

Superstition, bigotry and prejudice, ghosts though they are, cling tenaciously to life; they are shades armed with tooth and claw. They must be grappled with unceasingly, for it is a fateful part of human destiny that it is condemned to wage perpetual war against ghosts. A shade is not easily taken by the throat and destroyed.

Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)
French writer
Les Misirables, pt. 2, bk. 7, ch. 3 (1862).

Whatever alleged 'truth' is proven by results to be but an empty fiction, let it be unceremoniously flung into the outer darkness, among the dead gods, dead empires, dead philosophies, and other useless lumber and wreckage!

Anton Szandor LaVey
(1930-1997)
American occultist

The truth cannot be asserted without denouncing the falsehood.

Leslie Stephen
(1832-1904)
British writer

An organization that requires the suppression of facts and the discouragement of knowledge in order to maintain its supremacy, is the relic of a tyranny which our free age and our free thought are in duty bound to remove from the earth.

Lemuel K. Washburn
(1846-1927)
American writer
Is The Bible Worth Reading And Other Essays

The time appears to me to have come when it is the duty of all to make their dissent from religion known.

John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)
British economist, philosopher

One of the thorniest aspects of the first modernization process was the confrontation between establishments of religion and those seeking separation of church and state. The establishments of religion were looked upon as citadels of the traditional standing orders that had to be stormed if the forces of modernity were to be victorious. The political struggles over disestablishment were constant, severe, and often debilitating. Only in the United States was a reasonably clear-cut victory won for the separation of church and state. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the United States was able to forge ahead so rapidly in its modernization. There were no enormously powerful land-owning churches to hold off political reform or economic development as they did in Eastern and Southern Europe, and for a time in France, England, and Germany.

But it also turned out that political action based upon a secular theory of natural rights was not the only, perhaps not even the most important, aspect of the disestablishment process. The political role of nonconformist, dissenting churches, or radical Protestant sects who believed in the free exercise of religion without interference by government in religious creed or practice proved to be indispensable. "Separatists" like the Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, and Mennonites were opposed to establishments of religion on principle, but even those who were believers in a close alliance between church and state (Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Catholic) began to see the values of separation in societies where they were not the dominant church. Thus, the religious heterogeneity of the American colonies helped to undermine the religious establishments which had benefited from laws that imposed the doctrines of the preferred church and taxes that were levied upon everyone for the support of the established clergy.

Samuel Butler
(1835-1902)
English author
The Education of the West (1973), p. 304
from Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom

I would suggest the taxation of all property equally whether church or corporation.

Ulysses S. Grant
(1822-1885)
18th President of the United States

The divorce between church and state ought to be absolute. It ought to be absolute. It ought to be so absolute that no church property anywhere, in any state, or in any nation, should be exempt from taxation, for if you exempt the church property of any church organization, to that extent you impose tax upon the whole community.

James A. Garfield
(1831-1881)
20th President of the United States
address to Congress

There can be no perfect freedom unless the church and state are separated. But the church and state are not separated in America so long as the state grants a subsidy to the church in the form of tax exemption.

E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Church Is a Burden, Not a Benefit, In Social Life"

"Is a church too small and too poor to pay taxes? That means that not enough people want the church seriously enough to pay for its upkeep. Then, why should such a church exist? Why should atheists, agnostics and non-churchgoers be forced to maintain such a useless, unwanted church by granting it tax exemption?

E. Haldeman-Julius
(1889-1951)
American writer
"The Church Is a Burden, Not a Benefit, In Social Life"

Religious hatreds ought not be propagated at all, but certainly not on a tax-exempt basis.

James A. Michener
(1907-1997)
American writer

Top

Knowledge vs. Belief

There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.

Socrates
(c. 469-399)
Greek philosopher

To 'choose' dogma and faith over doubt and experience is to throw out the ripening vintage and to reach greedily for the Kool-Aid.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything

Acceptance without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western religion; rejection without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western science.

Gary Zukav
(1942-)
American spiritualist
The Dancing Wu Li Masters

There are in fact four very significant stumbling-blocks in the way of grasping the truth, which hinder every man however learned, and scarcely allow anyone to win a clear title to wisdom, namely, the example of weak and unworthy authority, longstanding custom, the feeling of the ignorant crowd, and the hiding of our ignorance while making a display of our apparent knowledge.

Roger Bacon
(c. 1214-1292)
British philosopher, scientist

We know too much, and are convinced of too little. Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.

T. S. Elliot
(1888-1965)
American-born English poet

The world holds two classes of men - intelligent men without religion, and religious men without intelligence.

Abu'l-Ala-Al-Ma'arri
973-1058
Syrian philosopher

Just in ratio as knowledge increases, faith diminishes.

Thomas Carlyle
(1795-1881)
Scottish historian

The greater our knowledge increases the more our ignorance unfolds.

John F. Kennedy
(1917-1963)
35th President of the United States

The theist and scientist are rival interpreters of nature, the one retreats as the other advances.

Joseph McCabe
(1867-1955)
British theologian

God, once imagined to be an omnipresent force throughout the whole world of nature and man has been increasingly tending to seem omniabsent. Everywhere, intelligent and educated people rely more and more on purely secular and scientific techniques for the solution of their problems. As science advances, belief in divine miracles and the efficacy of prayer becomes fainter and fainter.

Corliss Lamont
(1902-1995)
American philosopher
The Philosophy of Humanism (1988), p. 129, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

The true division of humanity is between those who live in light and those who live in darkness. Our aim must be to diminish the number of the latter and increase the number of the former. That is why we demand education and knowledge.

Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)
French writer
Les Misirables, pt. 4, bk. 7, ch. 1

The ideal of progress, freedom of thought, and the decline of ecclesiastical power go together.

J.B. Bury
(1861-1927)
Irish scholar
A History of Freedom of Thought, 1913
from Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom

If the ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, the knowledge of nature is calculated to destroy them.

Paul Henry Dietrich d'Holbach
(1723-1789)
French German philosopher
The System of Nature, p. 49

We are then to conclude that Christianity is held only by the ignorant.

Lemuel K. Washburn
(1845?-1930?)
American writer
Is The Bible Worth Reading And Other Essays 1911

If one were to take the bible seriously, one would go mad. But to take the bible seriously, one must be already mad.

Aleister Crowley
(1875-1947)
British occultist

There are two things in the world that can never get together- religion and common sense.

George W. Foote
(1850-1915)
British secularist

The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief.

Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)
Austrian neurologist

Changes in the educational levels of the general population in recent years appear to account for much of the variance in biblical beliefs over time. The current proportion of biblical literalists is 32%, only half of

what it was in 1963, when 65% of Americans said they believed in the absolute truth of all words in the Bible and that it represented the actual word of God. Belief in inerrancy is most likely to be found among people who did not complete high school (58%), and least likely among college graduates (29%).

Barry A. Kosmin & Seymour P. Lachman
One Nation Under God, (1993) pg. 268

Every step which the intelligence of Europe has taken has been in spite of the clerical party.

Victor Hugo
(1802-1885)
French writer

Appearances of the mind are of four kinds. Things either are what they appear to be; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be. Rightly to aim in all these cases is the wise man's task.

Epictetus
(55-135)
Greek philosopher

The most useful piece of learning for the uses of life is to unlearn what is untrue.

Antisthenes
(445-365)
Greek philosopher

It ain't what a man don't know that makes him a fool, but what he does know that ain't so.

Henry Shaw "Josh Billings"
(1818-1885)
American humorist

Most human beings today waste some twenty-five to thirty years of their lives before they break through the actual and conventional lies which surround them.

Isadora Duncan
(1878-1927)
American dancer

Education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you do know and what you don't.

Anatole France
(1844-1924)
French writer

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Alvin Toffler
(1928-2016)
American writer
Wisdom and Ignorance

Top

Science and Reason

If you're looking for the key to the universe, I have good news, and bad news. The bad news is that there is no key to the universe, but the good news is that it has been left unlocked.

Mary Redenius
()

Our age is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. The sacredness of religion, and the authority of legislation, are by many regarded as grounds for exemption from the examination by this tribunal. But, if they are exempted, they become the subjects of just suspicion, and cannot lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination.

All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason.

Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)
German philosopher

Everything has a natural explanation. The moon is not a god but a great rock and the sun a hot rock.

Anaxagorus
(c.510-428)
Greek philosopher

It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.

Arthur Conan Doyle
(1859-1930)
Scottish writer and physician

The church says the earth is flat, but I know that it is round, for I have seen the shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than in the church.

Ferdinand Magellan
(1480-1521)
Portuguese explorer

To assert that the earth revolves around the sun is as erroneous as to claim that Jesus was not born of a virgin.

Robert Bellarmino
(1542-1621)
Italian cardinal
1615, during trial of Galileo

The chief characteristic of the religion of science is that it works.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer

The priests used to say that faith can move mountains, and nobody believed them. Today the scientists say that they can level mountains, and nobody doubts them.

Joseph Campbell
(1904-1987)
American anthropologist
Myths to Live By (1972), from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

I think science has enjoyed an extraordinary success because it has such a limited and narrow realm in which to focus its efforts. Namely, the physical universe.
Ken Jenkins
()

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die out, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.

Max Planck
(1858-1947)
German physicist

Shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God, because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blind faith.
Thomas Jefferson
(1743-1826)
Third President of the United States

Religion has been impelled by science to give up one after another of its dogmas, of those assumed cognitions which it could not substantiate.
Herbert Spencer
(1820-1903)

English philosopher

Science . . . Has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the churches, and against the opposition of old precepts. Science can help us get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many years.
Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British mathematician, philosopher

Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition.
Adam Smith
(1723-1790)
Scottish philosopher

All good intellects have repeated, since Bacon's time, that there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts.
Auguste Comte
(1798-1857)
French philosopher

Experience never errs; what alone may err is our judgement, which predicts effects that cannot be produced by our experiments.
Leonardo da Vinci
(1452-1519)
Italian painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, inventor

What has been loosely called a conflict between science and religion is just reaching the acute phase. Up to the present the fighting has been an affair of outposts; the incidents of Galileo and Darwin were but mere skirmishes. The real conflict is to come: it concerns the very conception of the Deity.
Julian Huxley
(1887-1975)
British biologist, writer

Miracles arise from our ignorance of nature, not from nature itself.
Michel Eyquen de Montaigne
(1533-1592)
French philosopher

Truths for a new day:
The oneness of mankind.
The foundations of all religions as one.
Religion must be in accord with science and reason.
Baha'u'llah
(1817-1892)
Persian philosopher

The truth is that Christian theology like every other theology, is not only opposed to the scientific spirit, it is also opposed to all attempts at rational thinking . . .
H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

A God without dominion, providence, and final causes, is nothing else but Fate and Nature.
Sir Isaac Newton
(1642-1727)
English mathematician

One and all, the orthodox creeds are crumbling into ruins everywhere. We now witness the constructive work on a foundation that will endure through the ages. That foundation is the god of science - revealed to us in terms that will harmonize with our intelligence.
John Fiske
(1841-1902)
American philosopher

It is, indeed, marvelous that science should ever have revived amid the fearful obstacles theologians cast in her way. Together with a system of biblical interpretation so stringent, and at the same time so capricious, that it infallibly came into collision with every discovery that was not in accordance with the unaided judgments of the senses, and therefore with the familiar expressions of the Jewish writers, everything was done to cultivate a habit of thought the direct opposite of the habits of science. The constant exaltation of blind faith, the countless miracles, the childish legends, all produced a condition of besotted ignorance, of groveling and trembling credulity, that can scarcely be paralleled except among the most degraded barbarians. Innovation of every kind was regarded as a crime; superior knowledge excited only terror and suspicion. If it was shown in speculation, it was called heresy. If it was shown in the study of nature, it was called magic. The dignity of the Popedom was unable to save Gerbert from the reputation of a magician, and the magnificent labors of Roger Bacon were repaid by fourteen years of imprisonment, and many others of less severe but unremitting persecution. Added to all this, the overwhelming importance attached to theology diverted to it all those intellects which in another condition of society would have been employed in the investigations of science. When Lord Bacon was drawing his great chart of the field of knowledge, his attention was forcibly drawn to the torpor of the middle ages. That the mind of man should so long have remained tranced and numbed, seemed, at first sight, an objection to his theories, a contradiction to his high estimate of human faculties. But his answer was prompt and decisive. A theological system had lain like an incubus upon Christendom, and to its influence, more than to any other single cause, the universal paralysis is to be ascribed.
William E. H. Lecky
(1838-1903)
Irish historian
History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe (Revised Ed. N.Y., 1878) Volume I, p. 281-283

I regard religion itself as quite unnecessary for a nation's life; science is far above superstition; and what is religion, Buddhism or Christianity, but superstition, and therefore a possible source of weakness to a nation?

Hirobumi Ito
(1841-1909)
Japanese prime minister in the 1890s, quoted in S.L. Gulick, The Evolution of the Japanese
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

It is my deliberate opinion that the one essential requisite of human welfare in all ways is scientific knowledge of human nature.
Harriet Martineau
(1802-1876)
British writer

Science has proof without any certainty. Creationists have certainty without any proof.
Ashley Montagu
(1905-1999)
American British anthropologist

There is, in fact, no reason to believe that any given natural phenomenon, however marvelous it may seem today, will remain forever inexplicable. Soon or later the laws governing the production of life itself will be discovered in the laboratory, and man may set up business as a creator on his own account. The thing, indeed, is not only conceivable; it is even highly probable.
H. L. Mencken
(1880-1956)
American writer

Believe nothing, O monks, merely because you have been told it ... or because it is traditional, or because you yourselves have imagined it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings -- that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide.
Buddha [Siddhartha Gautama]
(c. 563-483)
Indian mystic and founder of Buddhism, last historical Budda

To save the world requires faith and courage: faith in reason, and courage to proclaim what reason shows to be true.
Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)
British philosopher
"The Prospects of Industrial Civilization"

Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look around for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it.

Bertrand Russell (Lord Russell)
(1872-1970)

British philosopher
"Why I Am Not A Christian"

All through the centuries scholars and scientists have been imprisoned, tortured and burned alive for some discovery which seemed to conflict with a petty text of Scripture. Surely the immutable laws of the universe can teach more impressive and exalted lessons than the holy books of all the religions on earth.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
(1815-1902)
American reformer
The Woman's Bible Part 2. (From Great Infidels pg. 143.)

Most of the dogmatic religions have exhibited a perverse talent for taking the wrong side on the most important concepts in the material universe, from the structure of the solar system to the origin of man.

George Gaylord Simpson
(1902-1984)
American paleontologist

All the biblical miracles will at last disappear with the progress of science.

Matthew Arnold
(1822-1888)
British writer

Science has done more for the development of western civilization in one hundred years than Christianity did in eighteen hundred years.

John Burroughs
(1837-1921)
American naturalist
The Light of Day

Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of common sense.

Chapman Cohen
(1868-1954)
British writer

Religion is a cockroach that scurries into the corner when the light is turned on, science is a pointy shoe.

"Thomas Doubtmoore"

Religion closes off the central questions of existence by attempting to dissuade us from further enquiry by asserting that we cannot ever hope to comprehend. We are, religion asserts, simply too puny. Through fear of being shown to be vacuous, religion denies the awesome power of human comprehension. It seeks to thwart, by encouraging awe in things unseen, the disclosure of the emptiness of faith. Religion, in contrast to science, deploys the repugnant view that the world is too big for our understanding. Science, in contrast to religion, opens up the great questions of being to rational discussion, to discussion with the prospect of resolution and elucidation. Science, above all, respects the power of the human intellect. Science is the apotheosis of the intellect and the consummation of the Renaissance. Science respects more deeply the potential of humanity than religion ever can.

P.W. Atkins
(1940-)
British scientist
"The Limitless Power of Science" essay in "Nature's Imagination",
John Cornwell, ed.; 1995 Oxford University Press, p.125

You will find men like him in all of the world's religions. They know that we represent reason and science, and, however confident they may be in their beliefs, they fear that we will overthrow their gods. Not necessarily through any deliberate act, but in a subtler fashion. Science can destroy a religion by ignoring it as well as by disproving its tenets. No one ever demonstrated, so far as I am aware, the nonexistence of Zeus or Thor, but they have few followers now.

Arthur C. Clarke
(1917-2008)
British writer
"Childhood's End"

The level of awe that you get by contemplating the modern scientific view of the universe: deep time (by which I mean geological time), deep space, and what you could call deep complexity, living things..... that level of awe is just orders of magnitude greater and more awe-inspiring than the sort of pokey medieval world-view which the church still actually has. I mean, they sort of pay lip-service to the scientific world-view, but if you listen to what they say on Thought For The Day [a religious program on BBC Radio] and things like that, it is medieval. It's a small world, a small universe, with the sky up there, very little advance since that time. So I yield to nobody in my awe for the universe and for life, but I also have a deep desire to understand it, in terms of what makes it work, what makes it tick, and not to take refuge in spurious non-explanations like "I just believe it because I believe it," that sort of thing.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
interview with Douglas Adams

You will hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds without a religious feeling of his own. But it is different from the religiosity of the naive man. For the latter, God is a being from whose

care one hopes to benefit and whose punishment one fears; a sublimation of a feeling similar to that of a child for its father, a being to whom one stands, so to speak, in a personal relation, however deeply it may be tinged with awe.

But the scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation... There is nothing divine about morality; it is a purely human affair. His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection... It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
Mein Weltbild, Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1934

As soon as you are willing to discard observational data because it conflicts with religion, you are giving up any hope of ever really understanding the universe. As soon as you pick religion as the touchstone of reality, then we have to start discussing how one can demonstrate the correctness of one religion over another when different *religions* disagree.

Wilson Heydt
(whheydt@PacBell.COM)

We must conduct research and then accept the results. If they don't stand up to experimentation, Buddha's own words must be rejected.

Tenzin Gyatso
(1935-)
14th Dalai Lama
Time April 11, 1988

The applications of science are inevitable and unavoidable for all countries and peoples today. But something more than its application is necessary. It is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for the truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on preconceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.

Jawaharlal Nehru
(1889-1964)
Prime Minister of India

In science it often happens that scientists say, 'You know that's a really good argument; my position is

mistaken,' and then they actually change their minds and you never hear that old view from them again. They really do it. It doesn't happen as often as it should, because scientists are human and change is sometimes painful. But it happens every day. I cannot recall the last time something like that happened in politics or religion.

Carl Sagan
(1934-1996)
American astronomer
1987 CSICOP keynote address

But honest men do not pretend to know; they are candid and sincere; they love the truth; they admit their ignorance, and they say, "We do not know."

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

What I have done is to show that it is possible for the way the universe began to be determined by the laws of science. In that case, it would not be necessary to appeal to God to decide how the universe began. This doesn't prove that there is no God, only that God is not necessary.

Stephen Hawking
(1942-2018)
British physicist
Der Spiegel, 1989

God was invented to explain mystery. Now, when you finally discover how something works, you get some laws which you're taking away from God; you don't need him anymore.

Richard P. Feynman
(1918-1988)
American physicist

On the contrary, if the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies like the crashing of this bus [full of children from a Roman Catholic school and for no apparent reason but with wholesale loss of life] are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless _good_ [italics in original] fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life, 1995

Do we, holding that the gods exist, deceive ourselves with insubstantial dreams and lies, while random careless chance and change alone control the world?

Euripedes
(485-406)
Greek dramatist
"Hecuba"

Top

Evolution

Man has reached his present state through the process of evolution. The last great step in evolution was the mutational process that doubled the size of the brain, about one million years ago; this led to the origin of man. It is this change in the brain that permits the inheritance of acquired characteristics of a certain sort- the inheritance of knowledge, of learning, through communication from one human being to another . . . Man's great power of thinking, remembering, and communicating are responsible for the evolution of civilization.

Linus Pauling
(1901-1994)
American scientist

No myth of miraculous creation as so marvelous as the fact of man's evolution.

Robert Briffault
(1876-1948)
British surgeon, anthropologist, novelist

Life is not a miracle. It is a natural phenomenon, and can be expected to appear whenever there is a planet whose conditions duplicate those of the earth.

Harold C. Urey
(1893-1981)
American scientist

The oldest of all philosophies, that of Evolution, was bound hand and foot and cast into utter darkness during the millennium of theological scholasticism. But Darwin poured new lifeblood into the ancient frame: the bond burst, and the revivified thought of ancient Greece has proved itself to be a more adequate expression of the universal order of things that nay of the schemes which have been accepted by the credulity and welcomed by the superstition of 70 later generations of men.

T. H. Huxley
(1825-1895)
British biologist, writer

This century will be called Darwin's century. He was one of the greatest men who ever touched this globe. He has explained more of the phenomena of life than all of the religious teachers. Write the name of Charles Darwin on the one hand and the name of every theologian who ever lived on the other, and from that name has come more light to the world than from all of those. His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity. He has not only stated, but he has demonstrated, that the inspired writer knew nothing of this world, nothing of the origin of man, nothing of geology, nothing of astronomy, nothing of nature; that the Bible is a book written by ignorance -- at the instigation of fear.

Think of the men who replied to him. Only a few years ago there was no person too ignorant to successfully answer Charles Darwin; and the more ignorant he was the more cheerfully he undertook the task. He was held up to the ridicule, the scorn and contempt of the Christian world, and yet when he died, England was proud to put his dust with that of her noblest and her grandest. Charles Darwin conquered the intellectual world, and his doctrines are now accepted facts.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

It is time for students of the evolutionary process, especially those who have been misquoted and used by the creationists, to state clearly that evolution is a FACT, not theory, and that what is at issue within biology are questions of details of the process and the relative importance of different mechanisms of evolution.

R. C. Lewontin
(1929-2021)
American biologist
"Evolution/Creation Debate: A Time for Truth" Bioscience 31, (1981) reprinted in EVOLUTION VERSUS CREATIONISM

The order of creation in the Bible is woefully incorrect and violates even the most simple and obvious rules of natural science.

Charles Cazeau
(1931-1999)
American geologist

Let me try to make crystal clear what is established beyond reasonable doubt, and what needs further study, about evolution. Evolution as a process that has always gone on in the history of the earth can be doubted only by those who are ignorant of the evidence or are resistant to evidence, owing to emotional blocks or to plain bigotry. By contrast, the mechanisms that bring evolution about certainly need study and clarification. There are no alternatives to evolution as history that can withstand critical examination. Yet we are constantly learning new and important facts about evolutionary mechanisms.

Theodosius Dobzhansky
(1900-1975)
Ukranian American geneticist
"Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution", American Biology Teacher vol.35 (March 1973)
reprinted in EVOLUTION VERSUS CREATIONISM, J. Peter Zetterberg ed., ORYX Press, Phoenix AZ 1983

To believe something in the face of evidence and against reason - to believe something by faith is ignoble, irresponsible and ignorant, and merits the opposite of respect.

A.C. Grayling
(1949-)
British philosopher

If today you can take a thing like evolution and make it a crime to teach in the public schools, tomorrow you can make it a crime to teach it in the private schools and next year you can make it a crime to teach it to the hustings or in the church. At the next session you may ban books and the newspapers... Ignorance and fanaticism are ever busy and need feeding. Always feeding and gloating for more. Today it is the public school teachers; tomorrow the private. The next day the preachers and the lecturers, the magazines, the books, the newspapers. After a while, Your Honor, it is the setting of man against man and creed against creed until with flying banners and beating drums we are marching backward to the glorious ages of the sixteenth century when bigots lighted fagots to burn the men who dared to bring any intelligence and enlightenment and culture to the human mind.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer
at the Scopes Monkey Trial, 1925

I suspect the reason is that most people have a residue of feeling that Darwinian evolution isn't quite big enough to explain everything about life. All I can say as a biologist is that the feeling disappears progressively the more you read about and study what is known about life and evolution.

I want to add one thing more. The more you understand the significance of evolution, the more you are pushed away from the agnostic position and towards atheism. Complex, statistically improbable things are by their nature more difficult to explain than simple, statistically probable things.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
from the _New Humanist_, the Journal of the Rationalist
Press Association, Vol 107 No 2

The theory of evolution by cumulative natural selection is the only theory we know of that is in principle capable of explaining the existence of organized complexity.

Richard Dawkins
(1941-)
British biologist
The Blind Watchmaker
(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 317

I viewed my fellow man not as a fallen angel, but as a risen ape.

Desmond Morris
(1928-)
British scientist
"The Naked Ape"

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a higher answer -- but none exists.

Stephen Jay Gould
(1941-2002)
American scientist
Life magazine, December 1988,
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Top

The "A" Words: Atheist & Agnostic

It has even been said that the highest praise of God is to be found in the denial of Him by the atheist, who considers creation to be perfect enough to dispense with a Creator.

Marcel Proust
(1871-1922)
French writer

Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. That principle is of great antiquity; it is as old as Socrates, as old as the writer who said, "Try all things, hold fast by that which is good"; it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him; it is the principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science. Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable. That I take to be the agnostic faith, which if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, whatever the future may have in store for him.

T. H. Huxley
(1825-1895)
British biologist, writer

The churches used to win their arguments against atheism, and other burning issues by burning the ismists, which is fine proof that there is a devil but hardly evidence that there is a God.

Ben B. Lindsey and Wainwright Evans
(1869-1943)
American jurist

Not one man in a thousand has either strength of mind of goodness of heart to be an Atheist. I repeat it. Not one man in a thousand has either strength of mind or goodness of heart to be an Atheist.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1777-1834)
English poet
to Thomas Allsop, ca. 1820, from dust jacket of Joseph Lewis' Atheism and Other Addresses

If therefore my work is negative, irreligious, atheistic, let it be remembered that atheism -- at least in the sense of this work -- is the secret of religion itself; that religion itself, not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally, not in intention or according to its own supposition, but in its heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature.

Ludwig Feuerbach
(1804-1872)
German philosopher
The Essence of Christianity, Preface (1841)

Beliefs, including religious ones, are learned. Which makes atheism a normal state of affairs and religious beliefs a learned "abnormality". No psychological theory is necessary to explain the causes of a normal base state. Any psychological theory of learning, attitude change or socialization can explain the causes of religious belief.

Rosemary Lyndall
()
clinical Neuro-psychologist

It is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are atheists and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so.

Ernestine Rose
(1810-1892)
American reformist

Atheism is the world of reality, it is reason, it is freedom. Atheism is human concern, and intellectual honesty to a degree that the religious mind cannot begin to understand. And yet it is more than this. Atheism is not an old religion, it is not a new and coming religion, in fact it is not, and never has been, a religion at all. The definition of Atheism is magnificent in its simplicity: Atheism is merely the bed-rock of sanity in a world of madness.

Emmett F. Fields
()
Atheism: An Affirmative View

Atheists are often charged with blasphemy, but it is a crime they cannot commit... When the Atheist examines, denounces, or satirizes the gods, he is not dealing with persons but with ideas. He is incapable of insulting God, for he does not admit the existence of any such being... We attack not a person but a belief, not a being but an idea, not a fact but a fancy.

George W. Foote
(1850-1915)
British secularist
"Who are the Blasphemers?" in Flowers of Freethought \

By the age of fifteen, I had convinced myself that nobody could give a reasonable explanation of what he

meant by the word 'God' and that it was therefore as meaningless to assert a belief as to assert a disbelief in God.

Though this, in a general way, has remained my position ever since, I have always avoided unnecessarily to offend other people holding religious belief by displaying my lack of such belief, or even stating my lack of belief, if I was not challenged.

F.A. Hayek
(1899-1992)
Austrian British philosopher
From _Hayek on Hayek: An Autobiographical Dialogue_, edited by Stephen Kresge and Leif Wenar (University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 40-41.

Gullibility and credulity are considered undesirable qualities in every department of human life -- except religion.... Why are we praised by godly men for surrendering our "godly gift" of reason when we cross their mental thresholds? ... Atheism strikes me as morally superior, as well as intellectually superior, to religion. Since it is obviously inconceivable that all religions can be right, the most reasonable conclusion is that they are all wrong. Does this leave us shorn of hope? Not a bit of it. Atheism and the related conviction that we have just one life to live, is the only sure way to regard all our fellow creatures as brothers and sisters.... Even the compromise of agnosticism is better than faith. It minimizes the totalitarian temptation, the witless worship of the absolute and the surrender of reason.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer
"The Lord and the Intellectuals,"
Harper's July 1982, p. 60, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Sometimes an agnostic is just an atheist covering its ass.
Scott Durkin
(1959-)
American educator

The best argument for the use of the name Agnostic is simply that the word Atheist has been so long covered with all manner of ignorant calumny, that it is expedient to use a new term, which though in some respects faulty, has a fair start, and will in time have a recognized meaning. The case so stated is reasonable; but there is a per contra that whatever the motive with which the name is used, it is now tacked to half a dozen conflicting forms of doctrine, varying loosely between Theism and Pantheism. The name of Atheism escapes that drawback. Its unpopularity has saved it from a half-hearted and half-minded patronage.

John M. Robertson
(1856-1933)
British writer

An atheist doesn't have to be someone who thinks he has a proof that there can't be a god. He only has to be someone who believes that the evidence on the God question is at a similar level to the evidence on the werewolf question.

John McCarthy
(1927-2011)
American computer scientist

I'm a born-again atheist.

Gore Vidal
(1925-2012)
American writer

Atheism, therefore, is the absence of theistic belief. One who does not believe in the existence of a god or supernatural being is properly designated as an atheist. Atheism is sometimes defined as "the belief that there is no God of any kind," or the claim that a god cannot exist. While these are categories of atheism, they do not exhaust the meaning of atheism-- and are somewhat misleading with respect to the basic nature of atheism. *Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief: it is the absence of belief.* An atheist is not primarily a person who *believes* that a god does *not* exist, rather he does *not believe* in the existence of a god.

George Smith
(1949-2022)
American writer

It dawned on me that a universe without deities was simpler and more internally consistent. The beauty and simplicity with which atheism, materialism (on the mind/body question), moral relativism, and other philosophical ideas all just fell into place has eliminated any doubt that I could be mistaken. I didn't realize until then how much cognitive dissonance the little logical inconsistencies in my previous beliefs had created. It is really wonderful for that to be gone. Atheism has given me more inner peace than religion ever could have.

David Nye
(1946-)
American professor and researcher

YOUR PETITIONERS ARE ATHEISTS and they define their life-style as follows. An Atheist loves himself and his fellowman instead of a god. An Atheist knows that heaven is something for which we should work now -- here on earth -- for all men together to enjoy. An Atheist thinks that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue, and enjoy it. An Atheist thinks that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellowman can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment.

Therefore, he seeks to know himself and his fellowman rather than to know a god. An Atheist knows that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An Atheist knows that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An Atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He knows that we cannot rely on a god nor channel action into prayer nor hope for an end to troubles in the hereafter. He knows that we are our brother's keeper and keepers of our lives; that we are responsible persons, that the job is here and the time is now.

Madalyn Murray (later O'Hair)
(1919-1995)
American atheist activist
preamble to Murray v. Curlett, April 27, 1961

If atheism is correct, man is alone. There is no god to think for him, to watch out for him, to guarantee his happiness. These are the sole responsibility of man. If man wants knowledge, he must think for himself. If man wants success, he must work. If man wants happiness, he must strive to achieve it. Some men consider a godless world to be a terrifying prospect; others experience it as a refreshing, exhilarating challenge. How a person will react to atheism depends only on himself-and the extent to which he is willing to assume responsibility for his own choices and actions.
George H. Smith
(1949-2022)
American author

Atheists are now here to stay. We are ready to take over the culture and move it ahead for the benefit of all mankind. Religion has ever been anti-human, anti-woman, anti-life, anti-peace, anti-reason, and anti-science. The god idea has been detrimental not only to humankind but to the earth. It is time now for reason, education, and science to take over.

Madalyn O'Hair
(1919-1995)
American atheist activist
"Atheists: The Last Minority"

Maybe if there were more atheists there would be fewer foxholes.

Holly Franking
()
Writer

All thinking men are atheists.

Ernest Hemingway
(1899-1961)
American author

I am not an atheist by choice, I am a seeker of truth. Being an atheist is a side effect of that endeavor.
J.D. Stockman
American writer

One day, atheism will disappear as a concept. Instead, there will be normal people and some weirdo believers.

Frank Zappa
(1940-1993)
American musician and composer

Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs.

Sam Harris
(1967-)
American philosopher and neuroscientist

The best argument against religion is a five-minute conversation with the average religious person.

Bill Nye
American scientist
(1955-)

Top

The Big Picture

I have no need for religion... I have a conscience.
Anonymous

We are sinful not merely because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life.

Franz Kafka
(1883-1924)
Prague-born Austrian writer

I wanted of live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and published its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much life so. Aim above morality. Be not simply good, be good for something . . . Let nothing stand between you and the light . . . When you travel to the Celestial City, carry no letter of introduction. When you knock, ask to see God- none of his servants. In what concerns you much, do not think that you have companions, know that you are alone in the world.

Henry David Thoreau
(1817-1862)
American writer

The history of science is not a mere record of isolated discoveries; it is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on one side, and the compression arising from traditionary faith and human interest on the other.

John William Draper
(1811-1882)
British-born American scientist
History of the Conflict between Religion and Science, Preface (1910 edition)

There's no reason to bring religion into it. I think we ought to have as great a regard for religion as we can, so as to keep it out of as many things as possible.

Sean O'Casey
(1884-1964)
Irish dramatist
Fluther Good, in The Plough and the Stars, act 1 from The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations

I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.

Stephen Roberts
()

We must bear in mind that the majority of men are imperfectly educated, and hence we must not needlessly offend the religious ideas of our age. It is enough for us ourselves to know that, though there is a Supreme Power, there is no Supreme Being. There is an invisible principle, but not a personal God, to whom it would be not so much blasphemy as absurdity to impute the form, the sentiments, the passions of man. All revelation is, necessarily, a mere fiction. That which men call chance is only the effect of an unknown cause. Even of chances there is a law. There is no such thing as Providence, for Nature proceeds under irresistible laws, and in this respect the universe is only a vast automatic engine. The vital force which pervades the world is what the illiterate call God. The modifications through which all things are running take place in an irresistible way, and hence it may be said that the progress of the world is, under Destiny, like a seed, it can evolve only in a predetermined mode.

John William Draper
(1811-1882)
British-born American scientist
History of the Conflict between Religion and Science, Chapter 1 (1910 edition)

Our passionate preoccupation with the sky, the stars, and a God somewhere in outer space is a homing impulse. We are drawn back to where we came from.

Eric Hoffer
(1902-1983)
American philosopher
New York Times (21 July 1969), on the first moon-landing
from The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations

The best that we can do is to be kindly and helpful toward our friends and fellow passengers who are clinging to the same speck of dirt while we are drifting side by side to our common doom.

Clarence Darrow
(1857-1938)
American lawyer

The last superstition of the human mind is the superstition that religion in itself is a good thing . . . When the shadow of religion disappeared forever ... I felt that I was free from a disease.

Samuel Putnam
(1892-1950)
American scholar

I shall not, as far as I am concerned, try to pass myself off as a Christian in your presence. I share with you the same revulsion from evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die.

Albert Camus
(1913-1960)
Algeria-born French writer
addressing Dominican priests in 1948, quoted by himself in The Unbeliever and Christians, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, p. 70, from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

For those who believe in God, most of the big questions are answered. But for those of us who can't readily accept the God formula, the big answers don't remain stone-written. We adjust to new conditions and discoveries. We are pliable. Love need not be a command or faith a dictum. I am my own God. We are here to unlearn the teachings of the church, state and our education system. We are here to drink beer. We are here to kill war. We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that Death will tremble to take us.

Charles Bukowski
(1920-1994)
American poet and writer
Life magazine, December 1988
from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

Do you want real TRUTH in capital letters? Then search yourself for why you believe the things you do. Don't be afraid to analyze why your religion gives you the high it does. Answer yourself this question: Is TRUTH important enough for me to give up my religion if that is required? Until you answer yes to this you are not being honest with yourself.

Dave Trissel
()

I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.

Frank Lloyd Wright
(1869-1959)
American architect

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.

Tenzin Gyatso
(1935-)
14th Dalai Lama

God is not to be worshipped with sacrifices and blood: for what pleasures can he have in the slaughter of the innocent? . . . Temples are not to be built for him with stones piled on high: God is to be consecrated in the breast of each.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (the Younger)
(c. 4-65)
Spanish-born Roman Statesman, philosopher

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest--a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
1954, from "Albert Einstein: The Human Side" edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, Princeton University Press

What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of "humility." This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist

Most humans feel what Paul Kurtz has called the "transcendent temptation," the emotional drive to

festoon the universe with large-scale meaning.... Secular humanists suspect there is something more gloriously human about *resisting* the religious impulse; about accepting the cold truth, even if that truth is only that the universe is as indifferent to us as we are to it; about facing the existential vacuum in all its horrible majesty; and constructing a life of compassion and exuberance on its brink without relying on the dubious shelter of faith.

Tom Flynn
(1955-2021)
"The Difference a Word Makes", Free Inquiry

Operationally, God is beginning to resemble not a ruler but the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire cat.

Julian Huxley
(1887-1975)
British biologist, writer

Man is that part of reality in which and through which the cosmic process has become conscious and has begun to comprehend itself. His supreme task is to increase that conscious comprehension and to apply it as fully as possible to guide the course of events. In other words, his role is to discover his destiny as agent of the evolutionary process, in order to fulfill it more adequately.

Julian Huxley
(1887-1975)
British biologist, writer

No difference of rank, position, or birth, is so great as the gulf which separates the countless millions who use their head only in the services of their belly, in other words, look upon it as an instrument of the will, and those very few and rare persons who have the courage to say No! it is too good for that, my head shall be active in its own service; it shall try to comprehend the wondrous and varied spectacle of this world, and then reproduce it in some form, whether as art or as literature, that may answer to my character as an individual.

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)
German philosopher

Freedom, morality, and the human dignity of the individual consists precisely in this; that he does good not because he is forced to do so, but because he freely conceives it, wants it, and loves it.

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin
(1814-1876)
Russian political writer

Like many people, I have no religion, and I am just sitting in a small boat drifting with the tide. I live in the doubts of my duty . . . . I think there is dignity in this, just to go on working . . . . Today we stand naked, defenseless, and more alone than at any time in history.

Federico Fellini
(1920-1993)
Italian film director and scriptwriter

Here we are, we're alone in the universe, there's no God, it just seems that it all began by something as simple as sunlight striking on a piece of rock. And here we are. We've only got ourselves. Somehow, we've just got to make a go of it. We've only ourselves.

John James Osborne
(1929-1994)
British playwright
Jean, in The Entertainer, no. 12.

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather recognize that it is he who is asked.

Viktor Frankl
(1905-1997)
Austrian neurologist

The beginning of wisdom is the awareness that there is insufficient evidence that a god or gods have created us and the recognition that we are responsible in part for our own destiny. Human beings can achieve this good life, but it is by the cultivation of the virtues of intelligence and courage, not faith and obedience, that we will most likely be able to do so.

Paul Kurtz
(1925-2012)
American philosopher
The Transcendental Temptation (1986), preface from James A. Haught, ed., 2000 Years of Disbelief

There is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to the church as a human being.

James Joyce
(1882-1941)
Irish novelist and poet
Letter, 22 Nov. 1902, in which Joyce declared his intention of leaving Ireland for good; from a private collection (an inaccurate text, taken from a typescript of this letter, is printed in Letters of James Joyce, vol. 1, 1957). From The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations

The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.

Carl Gustav Jung
(1875-1961)
Swiss psychiatrist

We have already compared the benefits of theology and science. When the theologian governed the world, it was covered with huts and hovels for the many, palaces and cathedrals for the few. To nearly all the children of men, reading and writing were unknown arts. The poor were clad in rags and skins -- they devoured crusts, and gnawed bones. The day of Science dawned, and the luxuries of a century ago are the necessities of to-day. Men in the middle ranks of life have more of the conveniences and elegancies than the princes and kings of the theological times. But above and over all this, is the development of mind. There is more of value in the brain of an average man of to-day -- of a master-mechanic, of a chemist, of a naturalist, of an inventor, than there was in the brain of the world four hundred years ago. These blessings did not fall from the skies. These benefits did not drop from the outstretched hands of priests. They were not found in cathedrals or behind altars -- neither were they searched for with holy candles. They were not discovered by the closed eyes of prayer, nor did they come in answer to superstitious supplication. They are the children of freedom, the gifts of reason, observation and experience -- and for them all, man is indebted to man.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

It is in the book of man, not the book of god, that we must look for examples of heroism, love, pity, justice, truth, honor, humanity.

M.M. Mangasarian
(1859-1943)
American secularist
The Bible Unveiled

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

Joseph Conrad
(1857-1924)
Polish-born British writer

My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality. Morality is of the highest importance -- but for us, not for God.

Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)
German-born, Swiss-American scientist
from "Albert Einstein: The Human Side" edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, Princeton University Press

You cannot show real respect to your parents by perpetuating their errors.... Do you consider that the inventor of a steel plow cast a slur upon his father who scratched the ground with a wooden one? I do not consider that an invention by the son is a slander upon the father; I regard each invention simply as an improvement; and every father should be exceedingly proud of an ingenious son. If Mr. Talmage has a son, it will be impossible for him to honor his father except by differing with him.

Robert G. Ingersoll
(1833-1899)
American lawyer, orator, freethinker

Most studies show that conventional religion is not an effective force for moral behavior or against criminal activity.

"The Psychology of Religion", by Bernard Spilka, Ralph Hood, and Richard Gorsuch, standard psychology text

The greatest achievement ever made in the cause of human progress is the total and final separation of church and state. If we have nothing else to boast of, we could lay claim with justice that the first among the nations we of this country made it an article of organic law that the relations between man and his maker were a private concern, into which other men have no right to intrude. To measure the stride thus made for the Emancipation of the race, we have only to look back over the centuries that have gone before us, and recall the dreadful persecutions in the name of religion that have filled the world.

David Dudley Field
(1805-1894)
American lawyer
in describing 'American Progress in Jurisprudence,' as quoted in Anson Phelps Stokes, Church And State In The United States Vol I, p. 37

I believe that at every level of society--familial, tribal, national and international--the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in an ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities. I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion.

Tenzin Gyatso
(1935-)
14th Dalai Lama

Many good souls protest against a destructive criticism of Christianity and demand a substitute. I do not feel any obligation to substitute a new god for the old ones. I should gladly let them all go. I do not approve of cancer, and yet I do not feel that I have no right to attack a quack who promises a false cure until I have no real cure to propose. As someone said: he who helps destroy the boll-weevil has done as constructive work as he who plants the seed.

Rupert Hughes
(1872-1956)
American writer
"Why I Quit Going to Church"

It is wonderful how much time good people spend fighting the devil. If they would only expend the same amount of energy loving their fellow men, the devil would die in his own tracks of ennui.

Helen Keller
(1880-1968)
American writer

Nothing is so fatal to religion as indifference.

Edmund Burke
(1729-1789)
Irish statesman, British politician

We cannot hope for a society in which formal organized religion dies out. But we can stop behaving as if it was worthy of our collective respect.

A. N. Wilson
(1950-)
British writer
"Against Religion"

It is man's destiny to ponder on the riddle of existence and, as a byproduct of his wonderment, to create a new life on this earth.

C. F. Kettering
(1876-1958)
American inventor

I admit that the generation which produced Stalin, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima will take some beating; but the radical and universal consciousness of the death of God is still ahead of us; perhaps we shall have to colonize the stars before it is finally borne in upon us that God is not out there.

R. J. Hollingdale
(1930-2001)
British writer
Thomas Mann: A Critical Study, ch. 8 (1971)

Humanity has the stars in its future, and that future is too important to be lost under the burden of juvenile folly and ignorant superstition.

Isaac Asimov
(1920-1992)
Russian-born American scientist and writer

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Other

Whether or not the statement is analytically true is not as important as the fact that it is *a priori* true and hence transcendentally true.

Charles Onstott
on alt.atheism

If you're gonna do business with a religious son of a bitch . . . GET IT IN WRITING. His word ain't worth shit, not with the good Lord teaching him how to fuck you on the deal.

William Seward Burroughs
(1914-1997)
American writer

Faith, the sweetest refuge and consolation, may harden, by perverse miracle, into a sword - or anyway into a club or a torch or an assault rifle. Religious hatreds tend to be merciless and absolute.

Lance Morrow
(1939-2024)
American writer

The whole system [apartheid] was absurd. It doesn't make sense. Racism-all of these things when you look at them they don't make sense. You know, Hitler - it doesn't make sense. When you look at them now it doesn't make sense. There's just a moment in time if you find the right balance between desperation and fear, you can make people believe anything.

Trevor Noah
South African stand-up comedian
(1984-)
Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee

When a thing has been said and well, have no scruple. Take it and copy it.

Anatole France
(1844-1924)
French writer

A book of quotations...can never be complete.

Robert M. Hamilton
()

It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations.

Winston Churchill
(1874-1955)
British politician

I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
American poet, philosopher

A provision of endless apparatus, a bustle of infinite enquiry and research, or even the mere mechanical labour of copying, may be employed, to evade and shuffle off real labour, -the real labour of thinking.
Joshua Reynolds
(1723-1792)
British artist

As I get considerably beyond the biblical allotment of three score years and ten, I feel with increasing intensity that I can express my gratitude for still being around on the oxygen-side of the earth's crust only by not standing pat on what I have hitherto known and loved. While oxygen lasts, there are still new things to love, especially if compassion is a form of love.

Norman Maclean
(1902-1990)
American author and professor
Young Men and Fire

How far you go in life depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because some day in your life you will have been all of these.

George Washington Carver
(1860s-1943)
American botanist and inventor

We were giving.
That's how we kept what we gave away.
Neil Young
(1945-)
American musician and activist

You're expelled from your mother's uterus as if shot from a cannon, towards a barn door studded with old nail files and rusty hooks. It's a matter of how you use up the intervening time in an intelligent and ironic way. And try not to do anything nasty to your fellow creatures.

Christopher Hitchens
(1949-2011)
American British-born writer

Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them - we can love completely without complete understanding.

Norman Maclean
(1902-1990)
American writer
A River Runs Through it and Other Stories

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Notes

As some may have already surmised, Why Johnny Shouldn't Pray is a play on the title of Rudolf Fiech's book, Why Johnny Can't Read. FreeOtis is a moniker coined in 1993 in honor of Otis Campbell on the Andy Griffith Show, as an attempt of a humorous homage to BR-549.

Twitter: @freeotis

Corrections, improvements, or additions are welcome.

The title WJSP neither rolls off the tongue nor tweaks the ear. Please suggest a better title! Also, this compilation is in dire need of non-Western input.

Other notes:

July 2000 -

As we live and die through the seemingly daily occurrences of religious zealots killing their own and others in the name of deities, many may continue to wonder for this and other reasons why these people and more still imagine such supernatural entities exist somewhere that are somehow involved in our personal existence. Yet how difficult it must be for those individuals who may be raised in a home and/or social environment that leaves them few religious options other than to grab a stick and jump around the fire the way others around them do: the American Bible belt, parts of the Middle-East, and elsewhere. Certainly, if reinforced from birth in such settings, it may be difficult for this and other reasons to ever question the behavior.

My own environment was in the American Bible belt. Fortunately, my parents were academics at a small university. I found in the works of whom my parents studied and taught information that was very helpful towards a development of an outlook that perhaps transcends other views seemingly overridden by geographical, chronological and/or other factors. Thanks to my parents for the mental and physical tools with which to question. Thanks as well to my mother for her nurturing patience those many years ago, which allowed me to undergo a genuine evolution of thought. For these and other reasons over the past few decades I have arranged a collection of thoughts. This compendium is intended, in part, to relate an overview of what some over the centuries have expressed about the topics related to religion. Placing it on the web seemed a natural extension of the previous sharing of this collection.

There are many compendia that can be found on the web and elsewhere that contain somewhat similar collections of quotes and thoughts; however, many arrange this information in general, innocuous or sterile forms - often random or alphabetical by author or topic. As an alternative, this ever-evolving sequence attempts to promote a certain path of reasoning.

Though I have collected many of these passages on my own, many others are derived from previous work of George Seldes and others. The best of these works, I believe, is the out-of-print The Great Quotations, compiled by George Seldes.

It is a hope to have provided a sequence of thoughts that may enable any adult-minded reader, regardless of age or background, to easily come to a higher realization regarding these broad topics and, perhaps if necessary, become freer or completely free of whatever dogma(-s) happened to be intentionally or otherwise instilled by one's self, relatives, society and/or circumstance. This resource is around a hundred pages printed. To get an idea of what is here, check out some of the initial entries for each of the twenty sections.

The entries shared here have been collected over many decades of interest. In the mid-1990s, the first five hundred or so were entered in various text processing software, printed, cut out, and fun-tac-ed along both sides of a long hallway. Over time these entries were arranged in an order similar to what appears here. This has been and continues to be a labor of love specifically designed for the enjoyment of young people and others who choose to embrace reason. - Scott J. Durkin

(first posted on the web January 2000)

March 2015 - Many more quotes have been added over the years and updates are frequent. Please share feedback poudrecs @ gmail.

Editor notes are in italic font. There was no attempt to alter any quotation, but there could be typos. Corrections are welcome. Any parenthetical inserts are from the original quotation of the writer, as in the second quote.

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