



**The Absence of God**  
**Nature and Reasons for Atheism**

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## Introduction

I remember sitting at a Friday night service at Fremont's Temple Beth Torah in the months before my son's Bar Mitzvah, feeling awestruck by its beauty. There was the music, sung by the female cantorial soloist – whose voice and interpretations i have yet to hear equaled. Just as beautiful was the message – one of caring for each other and creating peace throughout the world.

My feeling at the moment was overwhelming. I could be Jewish, join the synagogue, and experience this emotional high every Friday. But one thing stopped me. I knew that all of it is based on a false premise – that there is a “conscious” being in the sky pulling the strings.

That i know no such being exists has led people (including many who share my knowledge) to label me an “atheist”. In this paper, i'll explore what it means to be an atheist.

## Why Atheism?

When it comes to the concept of religion, i do not offer any labels for myself, including “atheist. Any attempt to explain the reasons for atheism is flawed at its core. It is as meaningless as trying to explain reasons for peace – a concept that exists only because of its counterpart, war. If there were no such thing as war, it is likely the word “peace” would not even exist – let alone be debated and strived for.

Atheism, likewise, is meaningless as a standalone concept. Even the simplest definition i found of the word, in *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, defines it as “a disbelief in the existence of a deity”<sup>1</sup>. Other definitions, including those that

name a specific deity – “God”, lead to the same notion. If nobody were a “theist”, nobody would be an “atheist”.

## History

Such a concept is not hypothetical. In his essay *Atheism in Antiquity*, University of Edinburgh Professor Jan Bremmer rejects such definitions because they ignore atheism “as a labeling device to slander your opponents, be they religious or philosophical ones”.

In the Greek Hellenistic period, those who contemplated the nature of the world were labeled atheists as a way to preserve the existence of then-accepted gods. In the time of the Romans, Christians and pagans called each other *atheoi*, Bremmer writes.<sup>2</sup>

Similar uses of the word continue today. In the most recent presidential election, Barack Obama’s opponents in both the primary and general election used religion as a weapon against him. Comically, they attempted to bind his ideas to the outspoken minister of the Christian church he attended, while simultaneously offering “proofs” that he is a Muslim.

That he became president in spite of these bogus issues is no indication that the American voter is ready to fully accept those who question the common belief. Obama, as John McCain also did, ended every one of his speeches with the phrase “God bless America”. Had he not, he almost assuredly would have been labeled an “atheist” (regardless of his beliefs) – something which polls suggested voters would not tolerate.

## Softer View of Atheism

So we see that historically, “atheists” have not necessarily been those who reject the notion of any deity, nor have they been those who choose to “become” atheists. So an atheist could be, to one who believes in a specific deity, someone who just doesn’t accept the existence of that particular deity.

Such an argument might be necessary for a religion to survive. After all, the acceptance of other deities would destroy the core of monotheistic religions that claim the earth, as well as the entire universe, was created solely by their “god”.

However, implying that everyone who doesn’t believe in that “god” simply must be wrong, simultaneously exposes a monotheistic religion’s weakest link. It is a link pointed out by Stephen Roberts during an Internet debate 15 years ago....

*"I contend 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."*<sup>3</sup>

## Arguments

Roberts’ argument, of course, does nothing to decisively relegate deities to the mythical realm. As with the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, or flying saucers, one cannot prove that Zeus, Yahweh, or any other deity is not real. Understanding that, i am obligated to justify my use of the strong word “know” in the introduction to this paper. How can i “know” there is no deity, or no purpose for life other than for our bodies to eventually return to our base atomic particles – just like everything else in the universe?

The answer comes from a zoology professor i had at the University of Maryland. During one lecture, after explaining in precise detail how chemicals penetrate cell

membranes, he said that's really only how he thought it happens - he couldn't be sure. He was sure, however, that reproducible experiments to date supported his explanation, while none had contradicted it.

In his book *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Michael Shermer differentiates this type of knowledge, *rationalism* - basing conclusions on logic and evidence - from *dogmatism* - basing conclusions on what one is told by an authority figure, whether it be a parent, minister, or even a textbook.<sup>4</sup>

Religions attempt to answer some of life's most difficult, yet basic questions. They do so, however, by parables, lectures, and rituals, while providing no physical or reproducible evidence of anything supernatural. "Have faith in us", they say, with no more credibility than a traveling snake oil pitchman.

While seeing no credible evidence of a god, i do see much physical evidence that contradicts the stories religions present. No physical evidence has been found to contradict theories such as evolution or the Big Bang. And, while someone trying to prove the existence of a greater being might point out that something had to make up whatever matter came out of the Big Bang, it is nothing more than a philosophical argument that attempts to explain something that is impossible to know otherwise.

I accept that i'll never know what came before the Big Bang. And i'll also accept that, as much as tangible evidence has allowed me to know, I know there is no higher being - just as i know that there is no Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, or flying saucers. Of course, i accept the possibility that i might be convinced otherwise at some point. I hope for it, in fact!

Also in the introduction, i implied that, if there were a supernatural being, it would require some level of consciousness of what it is doing. My reasoning for that is simple. If it had no awareness, it merely would be a yet-unexplained force of nature, rather than a deity.

## **The Flying Spaghetti Monster**

No religion's sacred story is any more credible than that of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The church came about in 2005 in response to the Kansas Board of Education's decision to teach "Intelligent Design" along with evolution, so that students could learn multiple viewpoints (disregarding that only one is based on observed facts). Fair enough, so teach our viewpoint as well, they wrote in a letter to the Board. I'm including the letter as an addendum to this paper.

To those who would deny the sacred story of Pastafarians, i simply would refer them to the organization's Web site<sup>4</sup>, and the Stephen Roberts quote above.

There is a practical – and more serious – aspect to this issue other than which actual creation stories are taught. Teaching *anything* that is supported by no tangible evidence alongside something that is, does not teach students how – or even the need - to distinguish between the two ways of acquiring "knowledge".

## **Conclusion**

Humans seem to have an instinctive need to understand their existence, with questions such as "where did i come from?", "who am i?", and "where am i going?". As people try to solve problems with the best tool available, it's understandable that early individuals or civilizations, in the absence of more

developed sciences, would turn inward to their minds to resolve such questions and arrive at explanations that, if not provable, at least made sense to them.

Yet, possibly because of the comfort these explanations might provide, many still prefer<sup>6</sup> to accept them at face value, even when confronted with direct tangible evidence that contradicts them. It's a sad irony, because in choosing myth over science, they likely are refusing the exact answers they are seeking!

In an interview on *The Daily Show*, Bill Maher, creator of the 2008 movie *Religulous*, which attempts to get people to address why they believe the things they believe, was asked by host Jon Stewart why those rejections are a problem if they make people comfortable.

Maher responded, "When these books were written, like *The Bible*, it was at a time when man didn't understand where the sun went at night, or what made their women pregnant, or what a germ or an atom was, so it was forgivable to make up myths and stories. But now it's 2008. It's not that forgivable."

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atheism>

<sup>2</sup> Bremmer, Jan, *Atheism in Antiquity*, The Cambridge Companion to Atheism (Michael Martin, Editor), Oxford University Press, 2007

<sup>3</sup> [http://freelink.wildlink.com/quote\\_history.php](http://freelink.wildlink.com/quote_history.php)

<sup>4</sup> Shermer, Michael, Why People Believe Weird Things, W.H. Freeman and Company, 2001

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.venganza.org>

<sup>6</sup> You did say people could choose what they believe