



## ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

It is important to consider ideas of atheism and agnosticism in any discussion of spirituality; many young adults begin to question the beliefs they have grown up with during this transitional time in their lives. Adolescent emotional development can be affected by traumatic events or by an ideological crisis that propels them towards doubt.

Atheism, by definition, is the absence (*a*, meaning “without”) of belief in gods (*theism*). While there are many reasons why individuals are atheist, they largely agree that there is no need for a God to explain the existence of life and the universe, and that human beings are capable of creating and living by moral codes without any reliance on, or belief in, a higher being.

Agnosticism means to be without knowledge (*gnosis*), and is normally used with specific reference to knowledge of the existence of God. While the term agnostic is commonly *misused* to describe a person who is simply undecided about the existence of God, strictly speaking it refers to the conviction that it is, in fact, impossible to know.

Just as atheism and religion are not antithetical (see below), agnostics may be theistic, that is, believing in God without any conviction that knowledge is possible. Alternately, atheistic agnostics do not believe in God, but also believe that it is impossible to actually know whether God exists.

Atheism and religion are not antithetical ideas. The following “isms” are categories into which many atheists see themselves.

**Humanism:** While atheism is the absence of belief, humanism is an active, positive approach to the world, centred around human experience.

**Secularism:** Secularists oppose religion or the religious being afforded privileges non-believers are not granted.

**Rationalism** is an experiential approach to life based on reason and evidence; it rejects authority that cannot be proved.

**Atheist Buddhism:** The Buddha held no claims to divinity, and while in many cultures Buddhism coexists with local gods, most Buddhists are disinterested in the question of a personal god.

**Humanistic Judaism** is concerned with the culture of the Jewish people; while it doesn't proclaim the absence of God, it looks to human beings for solutions to human problems.

**Christian Atheism:** Also known as “non-realistic Christians,” they believe that God is a projection of the human mind, and that faith is an attitude.

**Postmodernism:** For postmodernists, there are no absolute truths or values, as all societies are in a state of constant change.

## ESSENTIAL NON-FICTION

HECHT, Jennifer Michael. (2004). *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. Harper. ISBN 0-0600-9795-7.  
Grades 11 and up.

This book investigates the doubt in organized religious thought that has existed for thousands of years. The author looks at the doubts of many notable thinkers from Socrates to Jefferson and the difference between what people want to believe and the contradictions within the belief systems.

HITCHCOCK, S.C. (2009). *Disbelief 101: A Young Person's Guide to Atheism*. See Sharp Press.  
ISBN 1-8843-6547-7. Grades 9 and up.

*Disbelief 101* is a witty, metaphorical examination of atheism specifically written for young adults. The book examines issues of logical thinking, indoctrination, evolution, traditional agreements for God's existence, and the incompatibility of science and religion.

PALAU, Luis & Zhao QUIZHENG. (2008). *A Friendly Dialogue Between an Atheist and a Christian*. Zondervan. ISBN 0-3102-8533-X. Grades 10 and up.

This is a transcript of a conversation between an atheist and a Christian recorded in 2005. Luis Palau is a well-known Christian evangelist and Zhao Qizheng is the Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and former Minister of Information for China. Their dialogue touches on philosophy, history, religion, the Bible, creation, atheism, Confucianism, politics, ethics, and Chinese and Western cultures.

BILLINGTON, Ray. (2002). *Religion Without God*. Routledge. ISBN 0-415-21786-5. Grades 9 and up.

*Religion Without God* examines the assumption that rejecting God means rejecting religion. The author draws upon many different theological and philosophical ideas to examine what it means to "have faith," and how that can be different from holding a religious belief.

COMPTE-SPONVILLE, A. (2007). *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*. Penguin. ISBN 0-670-01847-3.  
Grades 11 and up.

Compte-Sponville calls himself a "faithful atheist," and his philosophical examination of spirituality is written in a non-confrontational style. Centered on the fact that religion is an undeniable part of human history and culture, which does not prove the existence of God, the author asks the big question: "Can we live without religion?"

